烙印の紋章Ⅳ
竜よ、復讐の爪牙を振るえ
杉原智則
イラスト●3
電撃文庫

烙印の紋章 Ⅳ

竜よ、復讐の爪牙を振るえ

杉原智則

イラスト●3

それでは駄目だ。
何もかも投げ捨てて私情に走ったのでは、
それでは、おれは本当にオーバリーと、
メフィウス皇帝と同じになる。
剣闘士から皇太子へ
オルバ

殿方が泣くとは、どういうことだろう？
ガーベラ第三王女
ビリーナ・アウエル

なら陛下。わたくしをアプターに遣わしてくださいませ。
メフィウス皇女
イネーリ・メフィウス

見たことか。
だからメフィウスなど当てにはならんのさ。

ガーベラ第二王子
ゼノン・アウエル

直接エンデと刃を交える事態となると、
それはもうおれの敗北だ。

ガーベラ貴族 **ノウェ・サウザンテス**

小さい被害に構うな。
虫の群れの合間を突破していくようなものだ。
多少血を吸われようが、肌を喰われようが、
こちらから退かぬ以上、負けはない。
エンデ第二公子
エリック・アマン・ドーリア

大陸中央部

デザイン●カマベヨシヒコ

Prologue

Apta Fortress. A border citadel located in the South-West region of Mephius that was encircled on three sides by massive ramparts, while the west side abutted on the overhanging cliffs. Directly beneath it, the Yunos River flowed from south to north.

The fortress' interior was designed to hold a population of five thousand. The day had faded, and surveying that panorama upon which darkness had descended, stood Vileena Owell.

At fourteen years old, she had recently travelled all the way from Garbera to marry the Crown Prince of Mephius, Gil Mephius. Her appearance retained some childishness, but particularly impressive was that if she glared at someone with hostility, it could make one feel as if they were being cut.

The wind was somewhat cool and carried a faint trace of moisture; she had several times heard the local people chatting about how heavy rains might fall before long.

The restoration work in Apta was currently being continued even throughout the night. Vileena's eyes were idly following as lamps were lit here and there, when she spotted different lights to the east side of the fortress.

The row of flickering lights drew nearer to Apta and, as they were allowed through the castle gate, Vileena revised her first thought that this was a night raid by Ax Bazgan's forces. In all likelihood, these were General Oubary Bilan's troops; she had heard that they were due to arrive at Apta any day now.

As the row of lights finally passed through the castle gates and into the fortress' interior, Vileena turned her gaze towards the sky. The thick clouds hung low, so that not even a single star could be seen. She sighed for the umpteenth time that day.

“So this is where you were, Vileena-sama.”

Theresia approached from behind her. She had been at her side since Vileena was born and had served as her Head Maid since their days in Garbera. Although her hair was streaked with white, both her figure and heart remained young.

“It seems that another of those tiresome banquets is being held in the hall again today. However this being the princess, you were somehow able to decline attending, were you not?”

“Ah”, Vileena nodded. “Say, Theresia.”

“Yes?”

“What kind of things would make a man cry?”

“Well...”

While Theresia was at a loss at the unexpected question, Vileena continued to look up at the sky from where she stood on the barracks' rooftop.

“More than that, to be wailing like a child, to look as though his body and his world were shattered. ...It was the first time I saw something like that. That a man can cry like that.”

Theresia was wise also: questions such as “Who is this about?” never left her mouth. In a quiet voice, she merely asked:

“Did this happen in front of you, Princess?”

“No.” Her abundant platinum hair undulated as she shook her head. “Accidentally... Yes, I only happened to see it by chance.”

After a short pause, Theresia said: “However it may be, gentlemen probably aren't so very different from ladies. For gentlemen, the way of doing things is to put on manly airs in public, yet even gentlemen are creatures who have delicate, fragile hearts.”

“Theresia, you truly are knowledgeable.”

“Even if it seems so, it is because I have lived more than twice as long as Vileena-sama.”

While the princess thought that let alone twice, it was more like three times as long, those words never left her mouth as she simply chuckled. Keeping a straight face, Theresia continued:

“That is why I think that a man's reason to cry where no one will see or know about it is probably not so very different from what Vileena-sama's reasons would be.”

“Like me?”

That thought had never occurred to her. As Vileena reflectively agreed, she seemed to be remembering her own past. When she was very young, she remembered sometimes crying after being scolded by her grandfather. Because she loved him very much, she had felt mortification at not being understood and a dread of perhaps being hated by him. Of course, nowadays, she realised that her grandfather loved her unconditionally.

Also when she was very young, she had cried when her brother Zenon had returned wounded from the war. Although Prince Zenon was thirteen years older than Vileena, she adored her

strong, kind brother, and he also doted on his much younger sister.

And going back not even a year, there was the time she had had to resign herself to taking second place in the airship race held in Garbera. At the open celebration after the race, Vileena had showed a smiling countenance, but when she had returned to her own room and after dismissing her attendants, she had fallen onto her bed and wept alone. She had been so confident in her skills. As she shed countless tears from the frustration of not achieving victory, she felt that her entire life would be tarnished by that disgrace.

And after that... was Zaim Fortress.

The Garberan general Ryucown had raised the banner of revolution and occupied Zaim Fortress. Ryucown had once been Vileena's betrothed. Even though they had met only a few times, he gave her an impression of masculine sincerity – in that sense, he resembled her brother Zenon – and surely because of that, Vileena had held a favourable opinion of him. She had neither knowledge nor interest in love between a man and a woman, but she had a faint premonition that if were Ryucown, she would be able to love him all her life.

It was such a man that, after a year's separation, she had confronted at Zaim Fortress. Vileena had believed that if she could meet Ryucown directly, she would be able to remonstrate with him. He who had the heart and soul of a knight surely loved Garbera, the country of knights, above all else. However, when she had tried to reason with him, she understood that more than for his beloved Garbera, to get closer to his ideals – that was the reason he rose in rebellion. She also realised that he was no longer someone who could turn back.

Not only that, Ryucown had unsheathed his sword and pointed it towards his lord's daughter, Vileena.

At that time, Vileena had cried. Not out of fear. As he was, Ryucown's determination was pitiable. She had been unable to stop him and had grieved at her own powerlessness.

“Vileena-sama?”

“Ah.”

Cutting the thread of the reminiscences she had been going through one by one, Vileena shook her head. Burned clearly in her mind was the sight of Gil Mephius as she had seen him from behind: heartbroken, on his knees and wailing. It was the time immediately after the imperial prince's return from Taúlia. In a castle room whose ceiling had collapsed, bathed in the fading evening light, Gil Mephius had been sobbing. He had seemed like a completely different person from the prince who had taken command during the battle and who had laid that bold and minutely thought-out trap.

Why?

Seeing him like that from behind, Vileena had caught her breath. Had not the conflict with Taúlia ended in line with Gil's strategy? Or had there been some devastating setback to the peace which should have been warmly received?

She hadn't been able to ask him. Somehow, driven by the feeling that it would be terribly wrong for her to see more than she already had, Vileena had turned away from there as though running away.

Could it be that someone close to him was killed during the fighting?

While the battle with Taúlia had ended in a complete victory, it couldn't be said to have been achieved without there being a single victim. Among the Imperial Guards, there were particular individuals such as Shique or Hou Ran who appeared to share an especially strong bond of trust with the prince.

Perhaps one of them was killed?

If that was the case, what could she do to help the prince? Since he was of course a man, he probably wouldn't want a girl to have seen him crying, so she hesitated to ask him directly.

From the start, ignoring the issue had never been an option for Vileena. Although in doing so she sowed the seeds of distress within herself one after another, she wasn't even aware of this troublesome nature of hers, as she hummed out loud.

Silence.

The uproar from the banquet downstairs that they had been able to hear until just now suddenly stopped. Vileena and Theresia looked at each other. Before long, they heard a woman scream. With that, the clamour started up again however it was obviously different from the previous merrymaking. Above all,

“So-somebody stop him!”

“Prince! Please stop, prince!”

Those shouts clearly reached Vileena's ears.

Chapter 1: Dark Clouds over Apta

Part 1

Oubary Bilan reached Apta some two hours after sunset. By all rights, he should have arrived while it was still daylight, however this was Oubary: having tarried too long with the women at the post-station town, he had ended up being late. But then, there was no reason to hurry. From what he had heard, after having been violently attacked by Taúlia, Apta had finally been forced into an alliance with them. He felt depressed just imagining the wretched atmosphere of defeat that must be pervading the inside of the castle. Although...

Since it's that prince who had supposedly oh-so changed from being so juvenile.

That being the case, it didn't feel all that bad.

Oubary harboured a grudge against the heir to the imperial throne, Gil Mephius. On the occasion of the prince's first campaign, he alone had been recognised for his meritorious deeds; at the time of Zaat's rebellion, his “going along” with Noue was supposed to result in Oubary playing the role of the patriotic hero, but because of the prince, that plan had completely fallen through and instead his disappearance in the midst of the rebellion had caused him to incur the emperor's displeasure.

Because of that, when a slave revolt broke out in Kilro, an area to the southeast of Solon, Oubary had volunteered to personally suppress it. As a general who boasted a long military career, turning his sword against something like slaves wasn't something he could puff out his chest about. He had accomplished his mission regardless, but his pride in his noble self had taken a severe blow.

Be it that time or this.

Oubary felt that it was all Prince Gil's fault. That the slaves had staged an armed uprising at that point was probably because of Zaat's rebellion. But Oubary believed that Gil's lenient attitude in appointing slaves as soldiers of the imperial guard, or in making the sword slaves who had risen in revolt his personal subordinates, was also to blame.

“Humph.”

Reaching a point from which Apta Fortress came into view, Oubary could clearly tell that its appearance had changed because of bombing raids. It seemed badly damaged. Oubary smiled nastily. Even the castle gate was not yet halfway through repairs.

“General Oubary Bilan, entering the castle.”

With that proclamation, he passed through the partially destroyed gate.

Oh?

Setting foot in the town's streets, Oubary drew together his finely manicured eyebrows. He had an uncomfortable feeling. Enemy fire had also altered the appearance of the fortress. Of course, it was to be expected that the damage would extend to the street. He had thought that the place would be sunk in gloom, yet contrary to his expectations, the townspeople who were coming and going as well as the soldiers with whom they were chatting light-heartedly all had cheerful countenances.

Oubary continued beyond the brightly lit main avenue and dismounted from his horse. As the castle hall was said to currently be unusable, he was guided to the largest of the barracks. Once he passed through the entranceway, Oubary's sense of disbelief grew increasingly.

In the spacious hall, a banquet was being held. All around, red-faced soldiers were walking hand in hand with women who appeared to have been gathered from the town to serve as waitresses. Mountains of food were piled high; wine cups were being refilled as soon as they were emptied; it was as if they were celebrating winning a battle.

“Oh, General.”

“We were expecting you to reach here today, but you've arrived rather late.”

Oubary's subordinates from the Black Armoured Division who had been stationed at the fortress were also all in high spirits. Oubary caught hold of a company captain called Bane.

“What’s all this? Did the defeated prince fall ill from despair?”

Bane grinned derisively as though he had heard something outrageous, his appearance as unprepossessing as ever.

“This is a victory celebration.”

“What, a victory!?”

“Even though it was Taúlia's Ax Bazgan, he captured him within this very Apta. The prince – that man is truly skilled at warfare!”

Oubary got a detailed explanation about the battle from Bane. When he learned that after luring the enemy in, the prince himself had bombed the fortress, he almost involuntarily yelped in surprise and it was only with effort that he held himself in check.

“That's not all.”

“"Once again", it was all he could do to give a forced smile, "A ground-breaking campaign, one without precedent. It certainly isn't something that just anybody could do. Although one should be careful not to fool themselves into believing they are rich just because they have money and material possessions."

Even though those words left his mouth, *It's strange*, was what he was thinking.

He had never spoken with Prince Gil before the latter's first campaign, however he had of course heard many rumours about him. Tales of how he was a fool who spent every day playing around had no doubt even reached other countries. Yet despite that, he had defeated Zaim Fortress' supreme commander, Ryucown, and had prevented a rebellion in Solon. And now, here in Apta, he had captured Ax Bazgan and even brought about a mutual alliance. Furthermore, he had done it without receiving reinforcements from his own country.

It's as though Gil were a general with years of military service.

It wasn't simply that it gave him an unpleasant feeling. He was obviously different from the prince that Oubary had heard about. One could have put it down to his having excellent staff officers, but here in Apta there were no other generals present, and almost all of the prince's attendants were former slaves.

Even though he was royalty, was it possible for people to transform thus in such a short time? Then, was it because he was a fool that, one after another, he came up with plans that other people would never dream of? Not only Oubary, many of Mephius' courtiers harboured doubts at the prince all but turning into a new person.

“Ah, Your Highness.”

“Your Imperial Highness, congratulations for your work against Taúlia.”

Within the hall, that Gil Mephius appeared before him.

Ah!

Shique and Gowen, Orba's long-time acquaintances who were in the hall drinking with their respective comrades, exchanged glances. Even from a distance, they could tell that Orba was drunk. Staggering unsteadily around the room, he smiled sloppily at the people who called out

to him. His face was as red as though scarlet pigment had been poured over it. He probably wasn't putting on an act either. Above all, they both knew that Orba had never been good with alcohol.

When Orba – though of course, to the people in the room, he was the first successor to the imperial throne of Mephius – spotted Oubary Bilan, he walked towards him, waving exaggeratedly.

“Oh, general. So you've arrived. You're late though, I was starting to get worried.”

“Your Highness”, Oubary bowed courteously, “I am unworthy of your concern. To my shame, as the matter in Kilro was unexpectedly troublesome, I did not arrive in time for the battle with Taúlia.”

“It doesn't matter. Come, have a drink.”

As he seemed about to topple over, a nearby chamberlain hurriedly made to catch him. Rudely shaking him off, Gil grabbed some wine from a tray and offered it to Oubary. As his face came closer, Oubary politely declined. Gil's steps were unsteady and his eyes unfocussed, but upon that, he glared.

“You won't drink my wine, general?”, he asked threateningly. Smiling sourly, Oubary took the wine cup and drained it. The prince watched him fixedly then,

“Your Highness!”

Without paying attention to the shouts of astonishment from the people nearby, he smoothly drew the sword from at his waist. Naturally, Oubary rapidly narrowed his eyes at this,

“What is this, Your Highness?”

“Shall we perform a sword dance, general?”

“A sword dance?”

Sword dances were a speciality of Solon's wherein several men would perform a dance while wielding swords. On the occasion of the Founding Festival, such a dance was held at the palace.

“Even though this is called a celebration, the entertainment is lacking. At times like this, the people of Mephius shouldn't be celebrating so crudely. It’s unrefined. So let's perform a sword dance, you and me. Everyone, rejoice.”

Thinking that the prince wasn't sober, Oubary's thin lips formed into a smile,

“Although a gratifying proposal, Oubary Bilan is not worthy of crossing sword with the Crown Prince. Ah, why don't we settle down over there and have a leisurely chat? I would very much like to hear about the battle against Taúlia.”

A sharp crack rang across Oubary's cheek. Gil had slapped the general's face with the back of his hand.

Rather than rise in uproar, the room went deathly silent. As the shocked onlookers held their breath,

“You won't cross swords with the crown prince? A cute thing to say. Then this crown prince orders you. Come, draw your sword.”

Gil made a thrust with the sword he held. Oubary 's smile went stiff but he maintained it even as he drew back. “Your Highness, Your Highness”, he appealed. The prince's posture was unsteady, so evading him wasn't difficult, however when his third thrust skimmed over the top of the general's shoulder, a sharp rush of air struck Oubary's cheek. A small cut opened on his skin. When they saw red drops trickle down his cheek, the women screamed.

"Ge-general."

"Your Highness, Your Highness, please wait."

The soldiers also clamoured from all around. Although Shique and Gowen were trying to make their way through the surging crowd towards the sweating Gil, he still continued to swing his sword. Oubary's hand went to his own waist. Seeing that, Gil's mouth twisted into a ferocious smile when –

A metallic sound resounded with a clang.

The sword was flung from Gil's hand. He and Oubary both stopped moving and gazed at the new sword that extended sideways from them.

The one holding it was a strong-bodied man. The former sword-slave who had competed with Orba in the final round of the Founding Festival's gladiatorial games – Pashir. He had swept Gil's sword away from the side. Pashir's eyes were partially concealed in shadows as he expressionlessly sustained Gil's burning gaze before returning his sword to his waist.

Around them, all was in uproar.

"General!"

Oubary held up his hand to take command of the soldiers who were rushing up.

"That... Wasn't that a little too much for a jest made under the influence of alcohol, Your Highness?"

Gil had picked up his sword and, though tension still surrounded him, he returned it to its scabbard.

"Then you should have agreed to a sword dance." He shrugged as though completely uninterested. Then, with a sidelong glance at Pashir, "every last one of you is unbearably tedious. That's why they say that the people of Mephius don't know how to set the mood during festivities." With that, he left the room, his steps still unsteady.

His hand held against his cheek, Oubary watched him leave. More than just turning pale with rage, his entire body was shaking.

"What was that?" He murmured to himself. "He's crazy to call that a festivity. Or was that him showing his true colours as a fool?"

In the doorway on the other side from the one the prince had disappeared through, a single silhouette stood stock still. Vileena Owell. She had been on the roof only a short while ago

but had come rushing when she heard the disturbance. Although she had arrived a little too late, she could understand the gist of what had happened from hearing what the people around the room were saying. She stood for a moment dumbfounded then quickly crossed the room to chase after the prince.

Part 2

"What on earth where you thinking!"

The group of people she was chasing through Apta recognised the figure of the princess who was holding up the hem of her skirt in order to rush towards them.

Held up between Shique and Gowen, the prince, who had been leaning against the wall to walk, looked as though he was hearing something incredibly annoying.

" What do you mean, 'what'?"

He didn't stop walking. She stomped towards him.

"I am asking if this time again, there was a deeper meaning to your actions. Up until now, no matter how foolish your behaviour appeared, you have always a secret reason that I couldn't begin to imagine."

"The fact is, His Highness acted that way because he was drunk."

Although Shique tone was placatory, his words had the opposite effect on Vileena. Her doe-like eyes widened even further.

"He did it because he was drunk? Hmm, is that so? In that case, let me change the question: becoming so drunk that you couldn't tell right from wrong and attacked a retainer with a sword, why on earth did you do it?"

"I was drunk. Because of the wine."

Gil grumbled in a thick voice. He sounded like a typical drunkard. Feeling even more incensed, Vileena started to draw closer. Just as Shique hunched his shoulders as though preparing himself for a thunderbolt, Vileena's furious expression suddenly crumbled.

Because she had remembered.

The prince's appearance, looking exactly like he was grovelling on his knees as he sobbed. Perhaps getting himself dead drunk also had something to do with that; as that thought occurred to her, Vileena lost the energy to be angry.

Entering the room that had been allocated to him in the barracks, Gil - or rather, Orba, threw himself on the bed. Gowen was the first to open his mouth.

"What happened?" He asked Orba, who was moaning softly. Shique turned towards Dinn, the page who had been awaiting the prince's return, and sent him back out saying "It's fine for today", then, having driven away the soldiers standing guard with a few glib words, he closed the door.

"Nothing happened."

"Orba", Gowen said in a low voice. Orba, who was currently as red in the face as Gowen was tanned, gave him a broad grin.

"Oh, right now, you've gone back to your slave overseer face. When they got up in the morning, everyone always knew what kind of mood you were in from the expression on your face."

"Is that right? Then I'll say this: right now, my mood's the worst." Gowen glared down at Orba who was burying himself in his pillow. "Destroying everything you've risked your life to protect up until now by going off and drowning yourself in alcohol is something not even a kid would do. This isn't like your usual calm self. You should be grateful to Pashir; if he hadn't stopped you, you'd have caused your own downfall."

"You're being too serious, Gramps."

"Orba!" Gowen barked angrily. He was raising his thick arms when Shique hurriedly stopped him.

"Now, now now, Gowen. Orba is constantly having to steel himself, so he must be exhausted. Suddenly going from being a sword-slave to the country's crown prince; given the circumstances, it's fine if he sometimes indulges in alcohol, right?"

"It's not." Gowen's breathing was ragged. "Orba, you said it yourself, didn't you? Making you a body-double was probably something Fedom did on his own. If anyone else in Mephius discovers you real identity, you'll be sent straight to the guillotine. Even you can't be ready for that. And also, if your real identity is discovered, we'll also be suspected of being conspirators and our lives will be forfeit. It's not just your problem if your neck gets sliced."

Orba stopped smirking and now lay facing upwards on the bed. Realising it, he turned over again so that his back was towards Gowen and Shique. "Orba", Gowen continued to press him for a response when he heard in a voice that was almost a whisper:

"There's no more reason to continue being the prince."

Gowen suddenly stopped pacing around. He exchanged a glance with Shique.

"There's no reason to let him live." Orba's back was shaking and his words tumbled out

unevenly. "My brother died here. He abandoned him. Alice and my mother too, they were probably killed. Because of him. He set fire to villages from his own country of Mephius with his own hands!"

Just a short while ago, Orba had seemed in high spirits from the wine, but now he did a complete turnaround, shouting then immediately after sniffling.

"This 'he' you're talking about...", began Shique. Gowen continued,

"Don't tell me you're talking about that general you attacked with a sword. If I remember correctly, he's called Oubary, right? What did that man do? Had you met him, before you became the prince?"

Even as Gowen was still asking those questions, a possible explanation for all that Orba had just said dawned on him. He already knew that Oubary Bilan was the general previously in charge of defending Apta. Since Orba's brother had died here, could it mean that he had been a soldier stationed at the fortress?

"You say... That he set fire to a Mephian village? Orba, it can't be", as though realising something, Shique raised his voice, "it can't be that you're planning to get revenge on him?"

Orba, his back still turned, didn't answer.

Which also meant that he didn't deny it. Shique gave a large gulp while next to him, Gowen sighed deeply. Up until then, Orba had always been somewhat mysterious. He had a side to him that was very cool-headed, but also he also had a side to him that would see his emotions suddenly burst out. From an outside perspective, the balance maintained between those two conflicting halves looked precarious. Because it was quite possible that at any moment, his emotions might overflow and destroy Orba's fragmented personality.

Is that moment going to be now?

Two years ago – no, it was probably more like three years now, at the time they first met, he had thought that this was a guy he couldn't take his eyes off. It wasn’t just the iron mask, his heart also wore a mask, so it there was no way to grasp his real intentions. Yet now, as he stifled his weeping, Orba's back could not have been more defenceless. The man who boasted of being undefeated with a sword was nowhere to be seen, nor was there any trace of the man whose enemies fell into the traps of his all-encompassing strategies. The shape of that back was just that of a young boy's.

However, Gowen deliberately kept his tone strict,

"Revenge, huh? If you say your family was killed, then sure, it's not something you can just forgive. But here and now, if you let revenge take priority, you'll lose everything. Everything

you've obtained by somehow surviving certain death, you'll…"

"Everything, huh? This 'everything', what is it?" Orba screamed in an almost hoarse voice. "I've already lost everything. What else is there? My life? Then I'll give my life. If in exchange he gets to taste the anguish of Hell, I'll give it any time!"

"You have duties to fulfil, Orba. You think that anything is fine if you're tired of messing around with the position of crown prince? But that position comes with responsibilities. Whether you want them or not. Give me one good reason why you should just do as you please."

"..."

It was the first time that Shique had seen Gowen be so talkative while admonishing someone.

From the time when he had been an overseer of slaves, he had never been a man to become deeply involved in other people's s lives. He would teach them swordsmanship, and he would teach preparedness and the tricks to pull through. However, he never showed anything like concern for other people's circumstances. It was a world were out of a hundred sword slaves that he trained, he could never know if even one of them would still be alive a year later. Learning about each and every one of them beyond what was needed for the job wasn't possible.

It had barely been about half a year since Orba had become the crown prince. During that time, the bewildering change of situation hadn't only affected him; which was to say that Orba hadn't been the only one to change.

That was why,

"That's right, Orba." Shique also tried to reason with Orba who was in such a state. "Our situation aside, you promised Princess Vileena reinforcements for Garbera, didn't you? If you kill Oubary here, you definitely won't be able to keep that promise. Since general Oubary is currently staying in Apta, there is no risk that you'll lose your chance to act. If you want, as Imperial Guards, we can help you keep an eye on him. It will fit right in with performing our usual duties."

Orba didn't say anything.

When the two of them left, utter silence filled the room. On the bed, Orba lay completely still.

Right after returning from Taúlia, Orba had spoken with the master blacksmith Sodan and learned of his brother's death. He had long realised that there was no possible way his brother could still be alive, but somehow he had still clung to hope – no, it couldn't even be

called hope, more like illusions.

Even if he himself was living through days of hell, as long as those he had been separated from, his brother, his mother, Alice and the others were alive somewhere, then maybe, before he knew it, there might suddenly come a day when they might meet again. However, when he formally heard the truth about his brother from Sodan, the fragile illusions that Orba had held within shattered. It wasn't just his brother: Alice, his mother, and everyone he had known before - all his illusions crumbled as he was made to realise from the bottom of his heart that none of them were anywhere in this world anymore.

He had wept. He had wept until his tears dried up, leaving way to burning emotions that raged from within him. He thought of slicing Oubary Bilan's neck. Or perhaps, when Oubary himself was within the fortress, Orba should face him with real intent to kill and without worrying about the consequences.

However, Oubary hadn't yet arrived at Apta. Orba's violent anguish was left with no target. Returning to his room, and without listening to Dinn's advice that he stop, he gulped down wine. One cup, two cups; as he got through them, Orba forgot his own limits. In truth, he didn't feel the least bit drunk. Yet when, after the sun had set, he heard that Oubary had arrived, he had found it difficult just to get up from his chair. After that, the events in the hall had occurred.

Tsk.

The alcohol he wasn't used to was starting to make him feel sick. He swallowed his own saliva several times and twisted his body left and right as he couldn't find a comfortable position. Under the weight of the accumulated fatigue from the battle at Apta to his visit to Taúlia, his body cried out for sleep.

"Brother..."

That word fell from rough, dry lips.

His brother had left to go beg for work as a merchant's assistant here in Apta, the fortress town nearest their village. Two or three times a month, he would take a holiday and return to his family. To Orba, for whom the sky and ground of the narrow gorge they lived in was everything, the stories he would listen to about life in the town were like something from a different world. Up until then, Orba hadn't known of the existence of ether-powered airships that flew through the sky, nor had he known of the existence of the circular arenas in which games were held where slaves competed against each other. Though apparently for those slaves, winning the right to live one more day was enough of a reward, Orba had insisted that "If I became a slave, I'd earn money!", which made his brother blink. In a village as rural as the one Orba lived in, there was also no opportunity to meet people from the slave class.

Orba's outlook had been broadened by the tales of his brother Roan's travels and by the many books he brought home. His brother had also been the one to teach him how to read and write. Orba became engrossed in what was written in those books. Illustrated stories for children; books about popular games; books which wrote of the time mankind had left the Old World; books that told of the ancient king Zodias and of his miraculous invention of magic; and, best of all, the many historical tales of heroes.

He would lose himself in reading, then be struck with despair since, after all, such tales would never happen to someone like him. But maybe, someday - if he could break away from that narrow village and step into the wide world - he held the faint hope that he too might live in that world of legends. He wanted to gaze upon the endless blue sea; he wanted to experience for himself the radiance of thickly piled snow in winter; to find out what kind of place the Golden Palace, said to be a nest of intrigue, really was.

Orba thought that his brother - who would open books one by one and also eagerly explain this and that to him - was like him. Since in town his brother had become familiar with the world that he himself didn't know, and since his brother was so much better than him at cleverly dealing with things, since he had always been ahead of him, Orba's young mind thought that his brother must have already set foot in the world that Orba only knew from books.

Within a murky sleep, Orba was dreaming.

In Orba's most vivid childhood memory of his brother, they were sitting side-by-side outside the barn. Above them, the stars were twinkling.

This is...

It was back in that time; just a few days before his brother had been drafted to Apta. Orba had been scolded by his mother after getting into a fight with Doug from the neighbouring village, and his brother had come to talk with him.

"Nobody knows what kind of person they truly are."

After he said that, his brother looked up at the sky that was bathed in the pale moonlight. For as long as he lived, Orba would never forget those words his brother had spoken then.

"What are you doing?" At that point, Alice also joined in. She was their childhood friend who lived in the house across from theirs. As she was three years older than Orba, in age she was exactly halfway between Roan and him. Before they knew it, they were talking about their memories. How once, when someone from the village claimed to have seen a wild dragon, the three of them had gone to the place where it had been sighted. However, the path through the ravine was complicated and they got completely lost. Finally, dragging their feet that

seemed to have turned to lead, they made it back to the village but as it was already two hours after sunset, they were harshly scolded by their parents.

"Anyway, since Mother told me off for dragging Big Bro along, he didn't get blamed at all. I got scolded in his place."

"But isn't that pretty much what happened?" Alice pursed her lips. "After all, the one who started everything and who was the first to brag that 'I've seen a dragon' was no one other than you, Orba!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Afterwards, when I asked the other kids about it, they all said that they hadn't heard that rumour. Now that I think about it, it must have been you, Orba."

"You're wrong! It was that Doug..."

"However it was, it was fun," Roan said. As he gazed up at the stars which seemed about to rain down, a faint smile appeared on his lips. The other two fell silent.

"Yesterday, I suddenly thought about it. Going by my memories, it was when we were walking through that ravine. I remembered it unexpectedly. In the end, after Alice said that we should retrace our steps, we struggled along for about three hours and finally reached that place which was like a plain filled with boulders. The wind was really strong there; yeah, if it was there, then there might be dragons – and not the kind of dragons that are selectively bred by humans or that have been domesticated, the real thing, from when they were called Dragon Gods, with intelligence and wings... no, it wouldn't be strange to find real dragons there, ones that could recite magic spells – is what I thought."

"Pff, that's really far-fetched. You're definitely brothers. I was thinking that you weren't really alike, but in that one area, you're exactly the same. Honestly, Orba still believes that he'll rise up in the world through strength. A commoner obtaining a country with nothing but one sword: what fairy-tale from what era is it that you believe in?"

Alice continued to tease him in that vein until Orba bitterly huffed: "Well, my bad." As he was saying that, Alice's face as she stared intently at his brother seemed somewhat lonely.

"It's not like that." His brother shook his head a little bashfully. "Even if for adults that was just a thee-hour walk, for us when we were children, that was a great adventure. Not being able to see your destination and having my heart beat fast just from that, I could really believe that once we got there, things would be different and that a life where every day was strange and amazing could be waiting for us." To Orba, it felt like his brother's words stabbed at his chest but he didn't know why.

After that, they started reminiscing again; when Alice poked fun at Orba, Roan gently rebuked her, they went over each of their memories in detail and laughed again.

And that was the last of the time he ever spent with his brother.

When Orba slowly got up, it wasn't yet daybreak.

The effects of the alcohol were wearing off. With only a few hours sleep, his young body had shaken off its fatigue. He grabbed the pitcher that was by his pillow and poured water down his parched throat, emptying the pitcher in one gulp.

Outside his window, the hazy moonlight was shining. For some reason, as Orba gazed up towards it, a single tear fell from the corner of his eye. He glanced casually towards his desk and saw that Dinn had piled a collection of documents as high as a mountain on top of it. Before leaving for Taúlia, he had requested that they be prepared. Within should be contained information about the Principality of Ende. Thinking ahead, it seemed that avoiding trouble with Ende was impossible. And so, he had stocked up on information, including intelligence on Ende's two successors.

But that's also no longer...

It probably wasn't something he would make use of. Like a puppet whose strings had been cut, Orba fell backwards. The bed bounced beneath him.

I no longer have anything to do with the crown prince and all that.

The ceiling he looked up at was much lower than that of his chambers in Solon. That was because since it was originally a room in the barracks, it wasn't all that large. Even so, compared to his circumstances when was a slave, this could be called the height of comfort.

He would kill Oubary. Which meant that he would lose everything from his current environment. Exactly as Gowen had said. But Orba had already lost everything he had wanted to obtain. What need did he have to fear anymore? And yet...

"You have duties to fulfil."

Gowen's words swept through his mind. And with it, a stabbing pain. Maybe because of the wine, or maybe because of the problems that had followed one after another, his head hurt as though it were being split apart.

I'll kill him. Kill him. Kill him...

Duties. Duties. Duties...

Orba's eyelids closed once more. There was no strength left in his body, nor in his heart. He no longer knew what his real self wanted. Even though Orba longed to kill Oubary, Gil clamoured incessantly not to do it.

I,

It wasn't just his head, the fever coursed all the way to his back. The brand that had been seared into it burned with the fire of his deep resentment.

I, who am I?

No matter how many times that cry was repeated within his heart, he felt as though the only thing to reach his ears was a loud echo.

Part 3

At that time. In the imperial capital of Solon, a Mephian lord, Fedom Aulin, was busy preparing for departure. As it had been a sudden decision, he was swamped with the work involved.

That girl!

But no matter how busy he found himself, Fedom didn't need to reconsider yesterday's hasty decision.

Ineli Mephius had suddenly shown up at his mansion and, of all things, had said:

"The current Gil Mephius – isn't he perhaps an impostor?"

Just by recalling that memory, he felt himself turn pale. However, Fedom was aware that he had cast himself into a fight in which he risked his own life. Just barely managing to conceal his trembling, he managed to reply laughingly,

"The prince is a fake? I see; the Court has searched in any number of directions for a reason for the prince's transformation, but as expected of Lady Ineli, your way of looking at things is entirely different from that of other people. However, if you say that His Highness the Crown Prince is an impostor, then what is his true identity? Who is this hero who defeated Ryucown and kept that Zaat's rebellion in check?"

"Well..."

"I don't know if a lady as young as yourself knows this, but looking through history, from time immemorial, there have been many precedents as surprising as this. In particular, there are anecdotes of people now called heroes unexpectedly being shunned and looked down on in their childhood by the people around them. Although I believe that it is the height of impoliteness for someone like me to speculate, if I may humbly hazard a guess, His Highness Gil Mephius will also be spoken of in history in that way, ah indeed, it will surely seem to posterity that he was misjudged by ordinary men unable to discern his talents."

"Is that so?" Ineli frowned. She ran her finger repeatedly around the rim of the cup that she held in her hand. Watching her, Fedom felt somewhat relieved. It was certainly unexpected that such a young girl should come near the truth, but,

After all, it's just a case of a daughter occasionally imitating her mother who became empress.

She probably hadn't had any particular plan.

"As a joke, it was amusing, however it would be best not to speak too recklessly. Whatever one may say, Gil-sama is still the heir to the throne. If someone were to take such a joke seriously and it were to be circulated within the Court, when the day came that it caused a furore, even you, an Imperial Princess, might be called upon to take responsibility. Because of that affair with Zaat Quark, the situation at the Imperial Court is also such that people's minds are uneasy."

As Fedom issued that subtle threat, with a "Hmmm, well...", Ineli smiled mischievously. And in fact, she left soon after as though running away scared.

However... Even supposing that was just a passing thought on her part, if it became a rumour, it could become a problem.

Given his situation, Fedom couldn't help but be rattled by a silly young girl and breaking into a cold sweat. All in all, the utterly selfish actions from Gil's body-double that he had put into place, Orba, were intolerable. He needed to quickly bring him back in hand and put an end entirely to all of his unnecessary behaviour.

With that said, Orba was currently at Apta Fortress, near the southwest border. Now that the prince had formed an alliance with Taúlia, how would the emperor treat him - would he recall him back urgently to Solon, or would he keep him in place as lord of Apta - as yet, no decision had been made.

As such, Fedom had decided to leave Solon for a while. He had so far repeatedly contacted the nobles from what could be called the anti-Guhl faction so that they could gather and hold a meeting in one place. That place was Kilro, southeast of Solon. The place where slaves had risen up in revolt only to be completely suppressed by the Black Armoured Division, led by Oubary Bilan. Kilro had been an area overseen by a powerful family loyal to Mephius, however, as they had been killed by the rebelling slaves, Indolph York, one of Mephius' twelve generals, had been appointed as its new feudal lord. By a stroke of good luck, he was one of those from the anti-Guhl faction that Fedom had won over to his side.

Thinking that it was a good opportunity, and under the pretext of assisting Kilro's governor for a short while, the nobles and generals of the anti-Guhl faction - seven people in all - hurriedly assembled.

It would be the first time that all the members met together. This was certainly no time to blunder.

To set up Crown Prince Gil and raise the standard of revolt against the current emperor - Fedom Aulin believed that it would soon be time to reveal this audacious plan to his family, and so once the meeting was over, he had planned to pay a visit to his domain of Birac, where

his family resided.

Though in many ways Fedom Aulin was by no means incompetent, for one engaged in politics, focussing the mind on a single issue could be fatal. The day after he had departed from Solon, exactly as if the timing had been planned, Emperor Guhl suddenly said to the vassals invited to his breakfast table:

"It's about time I sent a messenger to that brat Gil."

"A messenger?"

Simon Rodloom asked mildly. Naturally, there were many people other than Fedom who were curious as to what kind of approach the emperor would take with Crown Prince Gil.

"I have a verbal message for him."

The emperor had recently fallen into the habit of muttering in a low voice and with his eyes turned aside, without actually addressing anyone.

Surely...

The vassals exchanged looks. Neither by word nor by deed had the emperor expressed his intentions regarding the war between Garbera and Ende, and now they were going to find out what these were. They felt intuitively that the emperor's message would be to warn Gil against sending reinforcements to Garbera.

"Not only Gil, I also need to send an official letter to that Ax. The Bazgan House, which spat on the Dragon God's divine protection by splitting from Mephius – indeed, I had not thought I would one day be lightly exchanging letters with them like this." He spoke as though to himself.

At that moment,

"In that case, Your Highness, please appoint me as your messenger to Apta."

The request came from so unexpected a source that none of the attendants present – not even Simon – could hide their surprise.

Raising her slender hand, was Ineli Mephius. Of late, she had been secluding herself in the Inner Palace so her complexion was somewhat pale, however her eyes were brimming with liveliness.

The vassals immediately thrashed their arms around as though to say that it was unthinkable.

"Even though we may have formed an alliance with Taúlia, not a single official negotiation has yet been exchanged. Armed troops would also have to go with you for in case the situation broke down."

"You don't need to all exaggerate so much. I may have spoken a little suddenly but I only want to give Brother a surprise. Father, you'll say that I can, won't you? Princess Vileena should also already be there. If you say that I can't because it's dangerous, I wonder what the people of Garbera would think?"

"Princess."

Ineli laughingly stuck her tongue out at the sour-looking nobles. At times like these, Ineli had the art of turning even the most outlandish proposal into pretty, childlike coaxing. Of course, in a year's time she would need to use a different kind of tactic and charm, but in those areas also Ineli's preparations were not lacking.

"You too, Ineli, have yet to outgrow childishness." Emperor Guhl Mephius narrowed his eyes. "Very well. I will have an air carrier prepared. You will make sure to properly convey my message to Gil. The emperor's imperial decree is that unauthorised actions such as those he took with regards to Taúlia will absolutely not be tolerated a second time."

"I understand, Your Highness."

Unauthorised actions would not be tolerated: that surely referred to sending reinforcements to Garbera. The vassals' conviction of that was deepened.

However, Garbera was of course a nation allied to Mephius, the proof of which was that Princess Vileena was Gil's betrothed. Would prince Gil really accept the warning, and if so, how would Garbera respond to its ally's wait-and-see policy?

Scenting something like the odour of strife, the vassals wore glum faces. And, moments later, they perceived that a disturbance of a different sort might soon occur.

"Ineli."

Just as breakfast was coming to an end, Empress Melissa called out to her daughter. The empress too had not appeared in public for several days but, that morning, declaring that her physical condition was fine and accompanied by her daughter Ineli, she had shown herself for the first time in a while.

"Since the emperor is gracious, he granted you his permission; however you cannot behave like a little girl indefinitely. After all, you will soon be the elder sister of a child who will bear responsibility for Mephius."

"Ye-es."

Everyone smiled as Ineli's expression turned sulky after being scolded but, at the same time, most of the retainers once more exchanged glances.

As expected. Melissa-sama is pregnant.

A small crease appeared between Simon's brows. He had thought that an official notice would be given sometime soon. But at this rate, within a day, everyone in the palace would know about the situation.

Well now.

Pretending not to notice that other nobles were sending significant glances his way, Simon deliberately wiped his lips with his napkin. Although he feigned calm, his hands were damp with sweat.

Well now, with this, interest within the palace over the prince's treatment will take on a different meaning.

In one direction, Fedom had departed from Mephius' capital of Solon, from where Ineli would leave in turn in a few days; while in the city-state of Taúlia, standing near the border with Apta which was in the southwest of Mephius, Esmena Bazgan was also making preparations to leave.

Immediately after the peace with Mephius had been settled, Crown Prince Gil Mephius had visited Taúlia. This time it was Taúlia's turn to send an emissary for peace and Esmena had insisted on personally volunteering for that role.

"Father. Mother. I, Esmena, will now be leaving to go to Apta."

Within the audience chamber, Esmena performed her official leave-taking of her father, Ax Bazgan. Her mother, Jaina, was by Ax's side. Jaina had originally been a dancer, and her daughter had inherited the entirety of her beauty from her.

"Be sure to be sufficiently careful", said Jaina. "I have heard that he area around Apta is infested with bandits. Not only that but as you know, that land has only recently been returned by Garbera and there might be bands of rebels swooping to attack under cover of the general confusion."

Next to her, Ax unintentionally started coughing violently. Only a few days earlier, he himself had done the same thing as those his wife called 'bands of rebels'. However, Jaina was not sarcastically rebuking her husband. She had an honest and frank nature, and her thoughts

flowed straight out of her mouth. Unaware that her words might contain an implicit meaning, she didn't notice her husband's unease at all.

While Archduke Hirgo Tedos stifled a smile that seemed to say that was very like the lady, he turned to address Natokk, the commander of the Sixth Army Corps who had been chosen as escort for this mission.

"Be sure that no blunders are made. Whatever happens, do not let Lady Esmena out of your sight."

"Aye," Natokk nodded. He was the man who had led the surprise attack on Apta. He had been defeated and captured by Prince Gil however, when the peace with Mephius was agreed, he and his men had been released.

"And also", Hirgo lowered his voice so that the Bazgan parents and child, who were chatting together light-heartedly, wouldn't hear him, "if 'those' were to happen again."

Natokk's narrow face tightened. 'Those' were the fits that Esmena sometimes had. In the middle of the night, she would stagger out of her room like a sleepwalker and go outside, dragging along the several ladies-in-waiting who would be attempting to hold her back. Furthermore, she would repeat the name of that abominable ancient sorcerer again and again, as though it were an incantation.

Also because of that, Ax had at first been vehemently opposed to his daughter going to Apta. It was he who had said that she was not to take a single step out of her room. As such, he was even more unlikely to allow her to travel out of Taúlia and into the territory of Mephius, which until only a few days ago had been their long-time designated foe.

However,

"Is it not fine?"

The one who had supported her in a leisurely tone of voice was the strategist, Ravan Dol.

It was on a night, five days earlier, when they were drinking together and playing the board game they both enjoyed.

"There you go again, poking into other people's affairs. If an incident like that happened in Mephius, it might destroy that cobbled-together peace."

Ax – of whom it was pointedly said that when he was irritated, his vassals could not for a moment settle down either – sent him a glance. However, with a soothing expression, Ravan said:

"In regards to that, the princess' fits are subsiding. To a great extent, she is also going back to her previous healthy countenance. Turning down the princess' direct request and locking her up in her room will have an adverse effect, don't you think? This will be Lady Esmena's first time visiting a foreign country. A change of air and of scenery might also help her feel refreshed."

"But..."

"Nevertheless, in case of another fit", Ravan being Ravan, he whistled as he took on the elusive expression he was famous for, "they will learn that not only Lady Esmena but also the noble young ladies from all the various cities of Tauran suffer from the same condition. In the middle of the night, they slip out of bed and wander aimlessly about town in a trance."

"That's why..."

"However, while this story is whispered throughout the Tauran Provinces, if you take a single step into a foreign country, it appears that truly nobody has heard of it."

Ax now stayed silent. Ravan moved a piece on the board.

"It doesn't matter whether that condition comes from sorcery or an illness, carried by the wind, it will spread across the entire continent - is apparently what isn't happening."

"You – It can't be that 'that' will be a test using my daughter Esmena!"

"Indeed I am not loath to gather information about an enemy we may have to fight one day. However, Lady Esmena has a sensitive heart. I was thinking no further than that it would be good to let her stretch her wings a little... Of course, we will need to prepare with great caution."

"Humph. Although it would certainly be a shame to keep Esmena locked up forever. Ah, wait!"

"It won't wait."

"No, no, I mean the game. I was distracted for those last two or three moves. Let's start again from here."

"That's why I said it wouldn't wait. Be it in war or in life, there are things that cannot be redone."

Because of that exchange, Ax reluctantly allowed his daughter to go. Natokk would be the one to enforce the night watch. And so, because soldiers would stand guard for an hour each before being relieved, there was a large number of attendants.

Nevertheless, when Esmena called to take her leave before the departure, both her complexion and her expression were certainly brighter. Moreover, Ax pictured in his head a future in which his daughter would someday marry the prince of Mephius. For that, maintaining friendly relations wasn't a bad idea.

Watching uneasily over the situation with the Bazgan family was Bouwen Tedos. He was Archduke Hirgo's adopted son and though young, he was an army commander who had taken part in the second raid on Apta.

For three days before the date chosen for Esmena's departure, Bouwen had continually volunteered to be her escort, but as the situation in the Tauran Provinces was currently unstable, he was not permitted to be away from Taúlia for more than two or three days. Since Bouwen was of course a soldier, he couldn't reject an order from his lord and force his will through, however he couldn't help feeling concerned about Esmena. He was certainly concerned about her welfare in Apta but in his case, there were also a few more personal reasons as well.

"Bouwen, please look after Taúlia while I’m gone," Unaware however of what was on Bouwen's mind, Esmena smiled dazzlingly. "And after Father and Mother. I'll buy you something as a souvenir."

"Ha, ha ha..."

Not wanting his childhood friend to notice those personal reasons, his response was more strained than usual.

"What would you like?"

Bouwen, to whom that carefree question was directed, wasn't the only one who was currently troubled,

Hmph

Within the audience hall, there was another person who harboured mixed feelings, though they were different from his.

Raswan Bazgan.

He was Ax's nephew. His father was Ax's younger brother, Toún Bazgan, the general in charge of Taúlia's defence.

They've got some nerve all of them, showing those peaceful faces.

Mephius was an enemy of some two hundred years standing. Now, when a mysterious threat

known as Garda was looming, entering into an alliance that would safeguard their rear was essential, but naturally, not everyone within Taúlia welcomed that alliance. Because Ax was a very popular ruler, few openly displayed their anger and opposition, however the truth was that most people were feeling surprised and confused.

And chief amongst them was Raswan. He was a youth not yet twenty years of age but his temperament was even fiercer than that of his lord, Ax. Above all else, he had from the start been on equal footing with Bouwen as a candidate for becoming Esmena's husband – in other words, he was a candidate in the succession to Taúlia.

Putting aside his own wishes, he couldn't stomach the fact that after finally launching a bold attack on Apta, his uncle had returned having bound himself in an alliance with Mephius.

There's also that rumour that he had the sovereign's seal stolen from him.

It was a rumour amongst the soldiers. The sovereign's seal was part of Taúlia's history and was the pride of House Bazgan. If by any chance it had been stolen by their arch-nemesis Mephius, then Ax had lost sight of the very meaning of Taúlia's existence. Could such a man be entrusted any further with the fate of his country, he wondered as endless anger bubbled within him.

If I were Ax, I would order Esmena to seduce him, or maybe to conceal a dagger, and plan to recover the sovereign's seal.

It had happened with Garbera and in the end, Ryucown had risen up. And now in Taúlia too, an alliance with Mephius had lit the smouldering fires of discontent.

Chapter 2: The Princesses' Teatime

Part 1

Winding back time a little to a few days before Esmena Bazgan left Taúlia.

The morning sun was glittering on the surface of the Yunos river. Early that morning, a ship sailing down the river had moored at the pier, and half-naked men were carrying food and goods into Apta Fortress. The soldiers on guard were watching over them, yawning. As the war with Taúlia had just ended in peace, it was inevitable that they should be lacking any feeling of tension.

In the midst of that, Orba had raised himself up on his bed and the sun shone on his gloomy profile. Without moving in the slightest, he stayed rigid in that posture. Perhaps following somebody's good advice, Dinn, who would always come to wake him up early, was nowhere to be seen. *Probably Shique*, Orba thought vaguely; in fact, he had knocked on his door about three hours after dawn.

"Orba, are you awake?"

"Yeah."

The door opened as Orba answered. He stared blankly at Shique who was standing before him. Shique hadn't really thought anything of that rapid response, but unexpectedly, Orba was already getting dressed. He smiled to see that he appeared to have pulled himself together,

"What about breakfast? I can have it prepared at once, but..."

"No", Orba walked by Shique and went out. "Right now, I'm going to have you put together a military troop. Gather these people for me."

Shique was startled but, as he noticed that craftsman working on the fortress' repairs were coming from the opposite direction, he bowed with the attitude of an Imperial Guard before the prince.

Orba had selected various commanding officers for the reinforcements to be sent to Garbera. Said reinforcements were no more than a mere hundred. There were twenty mounted cavalry and dragoons respectively, as well as ten sky ship pilots doubling as regimental soldiers for the airship division, that were members of the Imperial Guard. Other than that, all the other infantry soldiers were battlefield slaves.

Such was the information that reached Gouwen's ears.

"Aren't there too few foot soldiers?"

"The rest will be set free," Orba answered in a terse mutter.

After Apta's defensive battles, the troop of more than fifty former sword slaves turned infantry soldiers led by Pashir expected to be released from their status as slaves. His hand had been detaining them for a while now but, "A promise is a promise."

Gouwen merely said 'Right', and no longer argued about the organisation. Pashir was the commander of the infantry, while in addition, Gouwen himself was appointed as adjutant to this military troop and so would go to Garbera. However, this time the one whose eyes went roundest at his own situation was surely Kain.

"I'm going to lead the military troop? It, it's a joke, right?"

Their acquaintance from the days in the Tarkas gladiatorial group went pale with dismay. As he conveyed the message, Shique smiled wryly, "Not you. The one who will be leading the troop to the bitter end will be **Orba**. The masked former gladiator who won the position of Clovis. The prince says he has to stay here – you get it, right?"

"I-I've never taken command in warfare!"

"It's fine to leave that to your adjutant, Gouwen. It's fine if you just stand at the front shouting 'Go, Goo!'"

"That again?"

At the battle of Zaim Fortress, Kain had been made to do something very similar.

"That Orba, since rising to greatness, he's gotten into the habit of playing truant. Honestly, he'll come by his deserts."

"Worse than the gladiator contests, eh?"

The preparations for the Dragonstone cruisers departure also began before noon. Once

supplies were loaded, the airships would be brought in. Orba watched the air carriers' landing port without saying a word. His arms folded and his expression dark, he seemed even harder to approach than usual. He looked as though he would kill anyone who approached him, so no one spoke to him.

For a while now, Vileena Owell, who was watching that figure from behind, had wanted several times to call out to him but had given up each time. That Gil Mephius had chosen to send reinforcements to Garbera was a joyful thing, however this time, the prince would be staying at Apta.

As the Imperial Guards and the Independent Infantry unit made up most of the reinforcements, it meant that the military forces remaining in Apta were – starting with Shique – ten or so Imperial Guards as well as the main force from General Oubary's Black Armoured Division. Certainly, as lord of the castle, Gil should no doubt stay and exercise his authority over it, however she had a feeling that wasn't the reason why he wasn't moving.

That being said, Vileena naturally had no clear idea of what that reason actually was. Nor why he had pointed a sword at Oubary the previous evening, nor furthermore why he had been weeping, thus she felt that:

It's frustrating.

Just when she thought that the conflict with Taúlia had brought her a little closer to his heart, this happened and she found herself understanding Gil less and less. Unintentionally, she let slip those feelings to Theresia.

"Are men so hard to understand, I wonder."

Without thinking of it as the tedious complaints of a fourteen-year-old, or rather, while thinking that it was a problem appropriate for adolescence, Theresia nodded with a complicated expression.

"It is the same thing for gentlemen. Their whole life long, they never seem to be able to understand women."

"Is that so?"

Even while talking to the maid who had served her for many years, Vileena's heart was agitated for various reasons. It wasn't just because of Gil, it also seemed that Ende and her home country of Garbera would soon be at war. It was because of this that Gil was preparing to send reinforcements, however this wasn't a decision coming from his country. There were rumours that the emperor, Guhl Mephius, seemed to be in contact with Ende. It was unclear what kind of effect the prince's current actions would have on the relationship between Mephius and Garbera - and on Gil and Vileena's engagement.

Though the prince was wrapped in an unapproachable atmosphere, there was one person who rudely stepped up to him. Gouwen. Orba didn't spare him a single glance as he approached but,

"Do you think this will be as hard a battle as Zaim Fortress? Because Kain is already shaking in his boots," he asked in a whisper.

"No", Orba's response was immediate but his attitude remained grim even as he spoke. "Ende probably thinks that Mephius won't get involved. There should be ongoing talks about just that. So to start with, they won't be prepared for this. If we make a flashy appearance, Ende will realise that they are at a disadvantage and probably won't make a move."

"Which means that the timing is crucial, huh."

"Whenever possible, it's best to act before the hostilities start. When it comes to the point that you're already crossing swords, for the enemy too it's too late to withdraw."

However, to repeat once more, these reinforcements were few in number. If they joined the battle, Ende would surely also realise that they hadn't been sent by Mephius itself.

"Noue said so too. This time, the greatest victory would be to not fight at all. Ende has its own circumstances. There is a risk it will cause considerable damage, but I don't think it'll progress like Zaim."

Having said that much, Orba glared at Gouwen.

"What is it?"

"..... Nothing."

Orba kept his mouth shut and wouldn't say another word. Gouwen understood that much. Despite this, he deliberately questioned him. And had gotten little from this Orba whose real intentions were impossible to read. Gouwen stared at him for a while, then, when he was about to open his mouth,

"Your Highness."

A soldier galloped up with so much vigour he seemed about to land at Orba's feet. The watch tower to the east of the landing port was in something of an uproar.

"What is it?"

Gouwen asked in Orba's place. However, his eyes almost immediately caught sight of the cause. In the now sunny sky, he thought that he could make out the shape of an air carrier

which, accompanied by an escort of several airships, was coming down in altitude as it approached the landing port. On its flank, it bore the Mephian coat of arms.

When he saw the figure of the girl who was the first to alight from the ship, Gouwen muttered,

"So it's the imperial princess. They've sent no messenger either by post-horse nor by airship."

Followed by a group of maids, Ineli Mephius walked towards them. Her beautifully fair complexion and pale red lips were so completely out of place in this border fortress that the surrounding soldiers instinctively seemed to want to flee.

When Ineli noticed Orba – no, to her he was her step-brother, Crown Prince Gil – she waved her hand, smiling. With evident satisfaction at the surprised gazes she was gathering, she walked up to Orba and curtsied.

"It's been a long time, Your Highness, Crown Prince Gil. I am glad to find you so healthy."

"Ah", said Orba, without adding anything else. Ineli puffed her cheeks in a pout.

"Even though your cute little sister has travelled a great distance to come and surprise you, you act so coldly."

"Really?"

As far as Orba was concerned, still having to play the crown prince was nothing but a troublesome pain. A strange sense of weariness had enveloped his body and mind. Because of this, his manner was more brusque than usual. Patiently waiting, Ineli observed him from the side.

"Well now, really. It appears that Ax going as far as to personally attack the fortress wasn't just a rumour. Brother, how wonderful it is that you are safe and without a single injury. But did you not think what you did was very scary?"

"Yeah, true", as Gouwen gave his back a small shove, Orba grudgingly threw in some appropriate words. "".....And, what’s your business?"

"What’s my business?"

Ineli's arrogant smile slipped for a moment and, with a casual sidelong glance, she looked towards the airship that was being prepared to be sent as reinforcement. The dragons were currently being loaded into the warship. At the front of the ship, a scattering of armed soldiers could be seen for the first time. Ineli's lips once more curled into a smile.

"But I thought that my brother would be lonely in this border land, so I came to visit in order

to console him. Would those be the reinforcements being prepared for Garbera, I wonder?"

"Yeah."

Gil nodded and for some reason, Ineli's eyes laughingly lit up like those of a small child who had just thought of a mischievous prank. "I see. Surely, the people of Garbera will be delighted."

"We are deeply touched that you took the trouble of travelling all the way here." Gouwen bowed. "It was truly kind of you to come to this distant place. I'm afraid that I don't know of any place that would be pleasing to Your Highness, but perhaps you would like to visit the citadel. Some of the soldiers can..."

"No. I want to have a look around by myself. By no means should you go to any trouble for me."

Ineli refused with a slight lifting of the hem of her skirt, then she and her group of attendant maids went to inspect the departure preparations. She looked all around the landing port. And her eyes met Vileena’s, who was also there.

She gave an acknowledgment in the direction of Garbera's princess. Ineli didn't halt her steps, so it was no more than a single nod. Immediately after and as though she couldn’t control herself anymore, the edge of her lips twitched and she lifted her shoes more quickly.

As Ineli's back receded in the distance, Theresia said bitterly,

"Well, what kind of manners are those? Princess, please do not lose your temper over it."

"Theresia is certainly uncompromising."

Even as she spoke, Vileena had a bad premonition. Since being taken hostage by Zaat Quark, princess Ineli was supposed to have remained secluded in her own room. Although Vileena had been worried about her health, upon seeing the imperial princess who had now suddenly come to Apta, rather than feeling relieved, Vileena remembered her strange coldness.

At about that time, the various commanding officers that Orba had personally selected had gathered the soldiers that they themselves had then chosen and had brought them to the Air Carrier landing port where, following Gouwen's instructions, they stood in orderly rows.

Directly before them, Orba had called over Gouwen and the mask-wearing Kain and, under the pretence of giving them encouragements, he was speaking to them in a low voice.

"Kain, just do whatever Gouwen tells you too. If upon seeing this ship Ende doesn't retreat, join up with the garrison at Zaim. Do not use the ship to attack. There are a few escort ships,

you can send those out."

"U-understood."

Noticing that the departure was imminent, Vileena ran towards them with quick, light steps. The one she approached wasn't Orba but 'Kain pretending to be Orba'.

"Orba, may the fortunes of war be with you. I earnestly entrust Garbera to you."

"Ha, ha haaa..."

Of course, since it was Kain, who had never met the princess, he was strangely over-formal. At his response, Vileena's eyebrows gathered in a slight frown.

"That reminds me, has the prince had the chance to return the medal to you?"

"D-do I have the medal? I-I wonder...."

Kain fumbled about in confusion. He had never heard about any of this and felt like cursing Orba. Since the person in question didn't appear to feel like sending out a life-boat for him, he could only stare fixedly at the real ship.

At this, Shique came to his rescue.

"But of course, princess. It is a treasured lucky charm that saved his life on the occasion of the gladiatorial games. Isn't that right, Orba?"

"Ah, aah, right. That's right."

"So I was able to meet **him** again."

A new calamity stepped up. As if to ignore Vileena, Mephius' Imperial Princess Ineli smiled at the swordsman in the iron mask. On the receiving end of a sweet smile that in no way befitted her age, Kain was at a loss what to do.

But it seemed that Ineli would not detain "Orba" for long.

"Mephius' new Clovis, I have great expectations for your military achievements." After giving a ladylike curtsy, she fleetingly raised her eyes towards the tiger mask in an imploring glance. "Someday, let us meet to talk in a more leisurely manner."

Having said that, and as though to indicate that she had nothing further to do there, she and her maids left the air carrier's landing port. Vileena, Shique and the others left behind involuntarily exchanged glances.

Chills he couldn't understand shook Kain's shoulders and made him shiver.

"Right, time to go!" Gouwen shouted.

A few moments later, they had boarded the cruiser and soon after that, as the eight ether-filled engines solemnly hummed, it rose from the landing port.

Unlike yesterday, today there was not a single cloud in the sky.

It was so blue that it felt like looking up at it stung Orba's eyes a little.

Part 2

After overseeing the departure of the reinforcements, Gil Mephius secluded himself in his room. It was the same as during his first campaign. In order to defeat Ryucown in Zaim, he had for a while refused to see anyone.

It seems he has a strange constitution: even though he is strong in battle, after it is over, his fever dies down and he is left prostrate, people gossiped.

Since of course the way the drunken prince had stubbornly pointed a sword at general Oubary was also gossiped about, it was likely that his fiancée Vileena, or even Oubary himself, had given him a severe scolding, so he was probably sulking too. Speculation flew around both inside and out of the fortress.

"He is quick-witted but it looks like there is also a part of him which is very fragile."

"That person is still a child."

There were also other points of view. It was probably normal that people thought up all sorts of reasons to explain the difference between the prince who was called a fool and the prince as he was now.

Be that as it may, and even if he was just a child, Gil was above all else the lord of Apta castle and his secluding himself in his room caused trouble for a great many people.

Before long, Esmena Bazgan would arrive as an envoy for peace. But when Shique once asked what to do about the reception for her, all he said – and through the closed door at that – was: "I'll leave it to you."

Of course, he didn't meet with Ineli, who had travelled all the way from Solon, either. Since he didn't even come out at mealtimes, Ineli had only once seen the prince and that was when she had first arrived at Apta.

Ineli's personality was such that she could never be satisfied if she wasn't constantly the centre of attention. Naturally, she was angry. Her company of maids, who knew her temperament well, talked as though they might soon be returning, yet Ineli was displaying an unusual amount of fortitude and had already spent approximately two days in this boring Apta.

Above all, seeing that princess Vileena - who would normally have been the first to criticise

such behaviour on the prince's part - seemed instead to be perplexed, far from being bored, Ineli felt her mood brighten.

Naturally, Ineli hadn't only come to Apta to give her brother a surprise. She had a reason for wanting to come here at all cost.

It was also related to her face-to-face meeting with Fedom Aulin in which she had rattled him. However, it wasn't simply to cause a scandal that she had said that the prince might be an impostor. It was a matter that stimulated her curiosity in its own right. However, it certainly wouldn't have been enough by itself for her to go out of her way to visit Apta.

Rather than prince Gil, Ileni's objective was,

Vileena Owell.

Whenever that name crossed to her mind, her usually rose-like smile turned as dangerous as the tip of a thorn. While it could be said that she had disliked her from the start, the reason why her hatred had grown so much was the drama of Zaat Quark's rebellion.

Ineli was taken hostage by Zaat and almost carried out of Solon by ship. And then, Vileena, piloting an airship, and Ineli's brother Gil, who was riding that ship, had quickly come after them.

Ineli couldn't forgive. Not Zaat, who had betrayed his country and who had, moreover, used her as a shield when he was cornered. No. The one thing above all others that Ineli could never forgive was that she had been seen by Princess Vileena to be bawling her eyes out with a gun shoved into her mouth, and that she had been saved by Vileena – and Gil's – intervention.

Ineli Mephius had locked herself away within Solon palace. After closing the door to her room, she hadn't let anyone in and had spent her days seeing almost no one. The people around her talked about how scary it must have been and how pitiable she was, however for Ineli, rather than fear, it was her injured pride and the thought that she had broken down that made her tremble.

Furthermore, if she took a step out of her room, she didn't know if she wouldn't run into the princess somewhere. And in that case, what kind of expression should she wear in front of the princess, what kind of things should she talk about with the princess?

Thank you for back then.

But did she want to thank her?

To be able to pilot that airship through enemy fire must have taken a lot of courage.

Would praising her in that way sound alright?

As she remained locked away, Ineli's heart sank into gloom. She was seized with the illusion that even the air that couldn't speak was sneering at her. Pride was Ineli's source of life. As long as someone praised her, as long as someone yearned for her, as long as someone offered her a love that asked for nothing in return, Ineli's path would continue to be bathed in light.

No matter what it takes.

At some point, the darkness that couldn't speak stopped mocking her, and the voice of Ineli's own heart whispered in its place.

No matter what it takes, I won't let Vileena stay above me.

Any kind of stage would do. She would prove that she surpassed Vileena – prove it to other people, but more importantly to satisfy herself – and as long as there was one stage on which she could prove it, it would do. Otherwise, she would no longer be able to conduct herself like Ineli Mephius. She would no longer be able to maintain the mask of the imperial princess that girls of her age admired.

And so, Ineli had applied to go to Apta. However, if it had just been a question of her complex, she might not have behaved so actively. It was strange to say but she had wondered for some time now if her brother Gil might not be an imposter. In other words, it was when her complex and her suspicions first came together that Ineli decided that it would be good to go to Apta.

Brother has changed too completely.

Her brother Gil had held in check the rebellion in Solon. If it had only been that one fact, one could have thought that just like his first campaign at Zaim Fortress and in order to promote the crown prince, the vassals had somehow done the work and then announced that Gil's feats had surpassed all expectations. However, Ineli had been watching carefully.

The Gil who had fearlessly confronted Zaat as the latter held a gun in hand was definitely a different person from the step-brother she knew. Even though their features were exactly the same. And then, when he had moreover been shot, her step-brother had faced Zaat and crushed his ambitions with his own hands.

That is not Gil Mephius.

As the days followed one after another, doubts turned into conviction. Who was he, where was the real Gil Mephius, and other such questions, she didn't know. But if Gil had truly been

replaced, then absolutely no one other than her should reveal the secret.

Indeed, to say nothing of Gil's fiancée Vileena, she would accomplish what not even the chief vassals in Solon had been able to do. And when that day came, Ineli Mephius would surely be praised as a heroine.

"What seems to be the matter, Princess?"

Elsewhere, Vileena Owell was standing at a window looking out when her shoulders shivered a little.

"I thought I felt a chill."

"Oh dear. If you catch an illness from a place you are not used to, it could linger. Resting at once is..."

"No, don't worry." As she shook her head, she crossed the room. "I'm going out for a bit."

No sooner had she spoken than she vigorously flew out. Theresia's cry of "Please wait!" didn't reach her in time.

By hiding behind every pillar in the corridor, Vileena outmanoeuvred Theresia. From time to time, the princess tended to want to go out alone without any attendants or bodyguards. Even at Garbera's royal court, dramatic chases involving Theresia and a group of maids were a common occurrence. Since arriving at Apta and in case of an 'emergency', Vileena had crammed into her head the map of the inside of the fortress.

About ten minutes later, she turned her steps towards a place that was entirely unbecoming for a princess.

Thump, thump, thump; each time the dragons' galloping sounded, dust was tossed up and fluttered in the wind. In the open space beyond the fence, the dragoons' training was being carried out. From the dragon pen adjacent to that open space wafted the creatures' fishy stench. Let alone royalty, it was the kind of place that commoners would not willingly approach.

However on the other side of the fence was the figure of a slender woman. She was straddling a Tengo, a small-sized dragon suitable for riding, and was galloping at the front of a group of soldiers all riding the same breed of dragon. It looked like she was being chased by the uncouth men but in fact, she – Hou Ran – was instructing them.

That being said, she barely said a word. She went in silence as much as to say that she was only concerned with letting the dragons fly.

Oh, Vileena was unintentionally fascinated. So as to reduce the wind resistance even by a little, and also to avoid being shaken off by the dragons, the men riding the Tengo lay flat against their backs, whereas Hou Ran sat easily and comfortably, her posture leaning slightly forward. However, she was faster than anyone. The Tengo's feet kicked the ground as it raced forward, slicing through the wind. The circular motion when it turned was also light and sleek. As for the soldiers desperately trying to follow, whenever Ran's dragon drew a curve, they were almost shaken off left and right.

"Utter shit!"

A voice rang out, rebuking the men. It wasn't Ran's. Looking towards it, a woman was leaning against the fence, watching the practice. That fat shape belonged to Krau. Originally, she had been a female slave serving Zaj Haman, a wealthy merchant in Birac. Currently she was employed by prince Gil, who had purchased her skill at piloting air carriers.

She had apparently bought apple jam at the morning market and was shovelling a hard biscuit lavishly smeared with it into her mouth. As Vileena approached her, with admirable speed she quickly hid the bag of food behind her back.

"M-Madam. This definitely isn't me being idle. The good people of Apta are taking care of maintenance on the air carriers, and of cleaning them inside too, er, everyone is doing it with good will, er, yes."

Of course, what Vileena didn't know was that every night, Krau would catch hold of soldiers and craftsmen and gamble at cards. When they had been fleeced from top to bottom, she would exempt them from paying a part of the money they had lost, but in exchange they would be made to check and clean the ships under Klau's instructions.

"I am not yet the Madam. You don't have to be so panicked."

"Then you won't tell the prince?"

Jam smeared around her mouth as she implored with upturned eyes, Krau's face was enough to induce unintentional laughter. However, Vileena deliberately kept a straight face and nodded.

"Of course not. More importantly, Krau, have you thought about our earlier conversation?"

"That earlier conversation, you mean..."

"The one about air carriers. I asked you if you would teach me how to manoeuvre those ships."

"Hmm", Krau crooked her thick neck. "Ah, no, of course I personally don't mind at all but

what does your husband say about it? You never know when something might happen, and if it did, the ships need to be able to fly at any time, so we have to use ether sparingly."

While her reason for quibbling was plausible, "This is annoying" was written clearly on her face. Vileena felt that she should be offended but it was hard to hate someone whose face expressed things so clearly.

"Right. At ease!"

They heard Hou Ran's sharp voice. Ignoring the soldiers who had been shaken about by dragons that were several times harder to handle than horses and who were completely exhausted by their merciless teacher's strict coaching, Hou Ran's expression changed completely as she started looking after the dragons.

For some reason, Vileena's expression became tense. She hadn't originally come here to once again entreat Krau to teach how to steer a sky ship. Vileena wasn't shy around strangers but this would be the first time that she had a face-to-face talk with Hou Ran. She was someone who was hard to grasp. Even more so than that prince.

Ha! Spurring on her heart that had become timid, Vileena went over to where Hou Ran was.

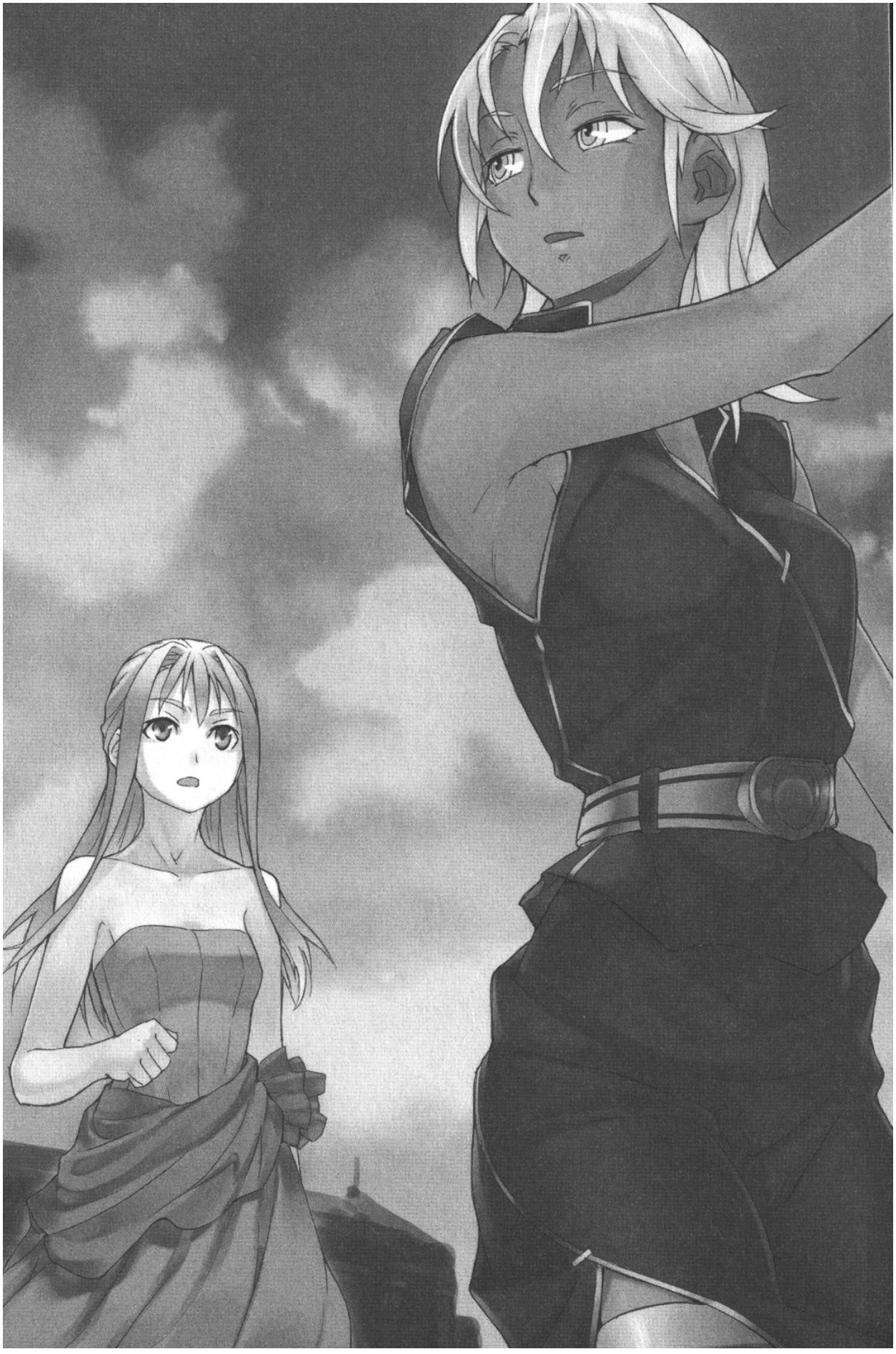
"Hou-san."

"'Ran' is fine."

Ran spoke without turning around. She gave the dragons their feed, gently stroking the Tengos' necks.

Having had the wind taken out of her sails, with an "Hum, er..." and her head inclined, Vileena hesitated a little.

"What?"



She demanded. As she approached, Vileena couldn't help but get the impression of a different kind of beauty from the elegance and refined demeanour that was so highly praised at Court. More than anything, her eyes that were reminiscent of a clear lake were what spontaneously captured Vileena's attention.

"W-well. I have something I want to talk about with you."

"With me."

Her voice was monotone, making it impossible to guess at her innermost thoughts. Somehow still undeterred, Vileena continued,

"Yes. The prince and you are close - or rather, it looks like you share a trusting relationship."

"The prince", Ran repeated in a mutter then nodded with conviction. "Ah, well, it wouldn't be strange if that's what it looks like."

"Wa, Wait, wait!" Krau, who had been listening – half curious, half nervous – to the exchange between the two, couldn't take it anymore and butted in, "Ran, watch how you talk. This is the princess of Garbera! The one who will become the prince's bride. Be a little...."

"It doesn't matter, Krau." Vileena stopped her. "... That prince is currently staying in his room. Does he often do this kind of thing? That is, after all, I always get irritated at the prince's behaviour, I get angry, or I scold him immediately, but every time, the prince brings about an outcome that leaves me astounded. Even if other people can't see it, he is always thinking about something. At the same time, I have come to believe that he is always suffering and worrying alone."

"....."

"But this time... I have the feeling that it's different from usual. And while it is embarrassing, I do not understand. So I thought that you who are close to the prince might be able to understand what is going on this time."

For a short while, Ran wordlessly continued to tend to the dragons. Krau, who was looking on, felt nervous as the silence dragged on.

"He isn't a child anymore." Ran said with her back still turned. "If there are things he thinks he needs to do, he will do them. Maybe at the moment, he doesn't think there is anything."

"But..."

The war with Taúlia was settled for the time being, reinforcements had been sent to Garbera; this time it was with Ende and perhaps even his own country of Mephius that there might be

strife. In such a situation as the current one, it was impossible that there was nothing that needed to be done.

Perhaps realising Vileena's implied meaning, Ran turned her head – and only her head – towards her.

"If you think it's so strange, you should barge in uninvited and ask him directly."

"... If I do that, then I'll be the one who has failed. There are many ways to understand another person."

"If you can't ask the person himself then you had best leave well alone."

Even Vileena felt a little angry at her blunt way of speaking.

"Do you seriously think that way?"

"I don't know what she means by 'seriously'."

"This *she*, to whom do you refer?"

Vileena grimly narrowed her eyes, finally pushed too far. She had shown calm and tolerance in her way of speaking, but it went without saying that the title of Third Princess of Garbera wasn't something cheap to be looked down upon to that extent. Because it wasn't a problem that only concerned her.

Ran on the other hand was smiling faintly, and as for the dragon that she was stroking with her hand, one could only wonder what it was feeling as it had been ducking its head as though terrified for some time now.

Just as Krau, who could feel the explosive atmosphere, once again held her breath in nervous suspense, a dignified shadow approached.

Part 3

"Oh my. Am I interrupting, I wonder?"

The one who come into view was another girl - Ineli Mephius.

"Your Imperial Highness."

Vileena was unable to conceal her surprise. In this kind of place, to meet this kind of opponent was something she had surely not expected. As for Ineli, though she herself had expressly gone there, she openly displayed her discomfort at being near the dust and the dragons' stench. Covering her nose with her hand:

"Older Sister, may I speak with you a while?"

She took princess Vileena away from the dragon pen to somewhere more private. Probably because she had already lost interest, Hou Ran allowed the training to resume in the open grounds.

Once the two of them were alone, Vileena felt a little tense for different reasons than just before. Be it that time of the party for Mephius' Founding Festival, or at the time of Zaat's rebellion, or of course now that the two of them were alone, there was something similar.

She seems to be doing surprisingly well.

Vileena naturally did not have any illusions about the day Ineli descended upon Apta or on the meaning of the smile she was turning her way. She had had unconcealed hostility directed towards herself. The Ineli who now confronted her was thoroughly the same as before, but when it came down to it, she didn't know what kind of fight she would start this time.

Vileena mentally braced herself, however, Ineli said something unexpected.

"It would seem that Taúlia's princess, Lady Esmena Bazgan, will be arriving the day after tomorrow. With Brother in that state, he won't have the heart to receive her properly. Are you not also worried about it, Princess?"

"Y-yes."

"Of course, one cannot say His Imperial Highness the Crown Prince will be barricade himself against Lady Esmena the whole time. In addition, you, Older Sister, do not have any false pride, so..."

"So?"

"Would you entrust the reception to Ineli?"

Not for one moment could Vileena guess the real intentions behind this smilingly made request.

After that, Ineli put on such a vigorous display of work that it seemed hard to believe that she had secluded herself in Solon.

As the bombed-out Great Hall couldn't be used, she was quick to decide to that the party would be held in the barracks' ground floor hall and briskly gave the craftsmen instructions about the elegant decorations they were to start working on. From the castle, she had them bring the furnishings that had remained unscathed: ottomans, tables and such, as well as paintings and twilled cloth; then with an impeccable sense of balance, she rearranged them.

She chose the menu for the meals. Furthermore, she personally went to the wine cellars and, after carefully listening to the opinion of a person who was knowledgeable about the preferences of those from the Western regions, she selected several varieties of wine. As though suddenly thinking about it, she summoned the second-in-command of the Imperial Guards, Shique.

"I would like to have a sword dance performed in front of our guests from Taúlia. Would you be so kind as to select a number of skilled swordsmen", she ordered him.

In response to the sudden summons, Shique had merely adopted a respectful posture, but at this he abruptly scrutinised her face.

"You will also take part in the sword dance. It will be good if you put on a show as it will please our guests. I leave it to you."

It was an order that left no room for agreeing or disagreeing. The swordfight-loving Ineli had originally come to know of Shique during his time as a gladiator.

After that, Ineli gave orders to the civil servants and also to the townspeople to prepare for the reception.

Vileena could only watch as the preparations steadily advanced. Even though she was skilful at handling guns and airships, she was extremely poor in matters such as these. Above all else, Vileena was bad with things such as feasts or parties, and she was inexperienced at performing the host's duty of warmly welcoming everyone.

And so, since being the only one with nothing to do in the midst of busy surroundings was

unbearable to her nature, she asked Ineli if there was anything she could do to help.

"Didn't you promise that you would entrust this to me?" Ineli asked in a loud voice to which she added a smile too alluring to fit her age.

"Older sister, it is alright for you to simply to be present when Lady Esmena is here. All the same, as the betrothed to the lord of this castle, it might also cause the other party to feel suspicious if the two of you don't appear together. It seems that Esmena Bazgan has never set a single out of Taúlia before. I am sure she would enjoy it if you were to tell her amusing stories about Garbera."

"A-amusing stories?"

After which, in her room, Vileena found herself in a bind, her head filled with worries about this and that. The princess had never considered something like whether or not she herself had a sense of humour. Theresia was unable to just watch and remain indifferent.

"Princess. An 'amusing story' does not have to be a story at which you hold your sides with laughter. It's quite alright if you talk about perfectly normal things. After all, they should be able to find enjoyment in a conversation that is simply about foreign cultures and manners."

However even with this advice, Vileena was incapable of doing things negligently and once she had convinced herself of that something had to be done in a certain way, she wasn't readily going to change that belief. With so many unfamiliar things around her, Theresia was worried that at any moment, she might have a spurt of mental growth so intense that she might develop a fever and collapse.

And like that, time passed in the blink of an eye until very little remained before Esmena's arrival.

During this time, prince Gil Mephius never once left his own room, and while Shique and the other Imperial Guards were worried about it, they could only practice the sword dance as they had been ordered to by Ineli.

Amidst all this turmoil, Oubary Bilan was the only one whose attitude was unconcerned. When an enemy wasn't threatening to break through the border but was instead warmly welcomed, there was another little that a man who, like him, relied on military arts could do. From morning onwards, he devoted himself to just drinking.

Whenever Oubary got drunk, those of his subordinates who were in attendance thought it was strange how he would stroke the wound on his cheek, saying "It hurts".

Other than the imperial prince, there was one other thing that Oubary couldn't stomach. The reinforcements for Garbera.

When Oubary first heard that the prince was organising them, he was in two minds about it. He still had a lingering affection for Garbera. As Noue Salzantes valued him more highly than his homeland of Mephius did, he had originally requested his help in making use of Zaat's plan. But now that the plan for Solon had failed and that he himself had also been sent as reinforcement, he felt like this time he would like to be the one to offer Noue a favour and put him in his debt.

However, he was well aware that his own country had no intention of sending reinforcements to Garbera. Because he had incurred the emperor's displeasure by disappearing at the time of Zaat's rebellion, the fact was that he wanted to avoid provoking Guhl Mephius' temper any further.

Thus Oubary, conflicted because of this dilemma, was irritated by his current circumstances of having spare time on his hands.

"I'm not the kind of man made to finish as a mere general!"

As Oubary repeated that as he stroked the wound on his cheek, the soldiers from the Black Armoured Division who kept him company felt deeply uncomfortable.

While the preparations in Apta were busily underway, Esmena Bazgan had crossed the border as soon as everything had finally been ready. As it was the first time she rode an air carrier, she admired every single part of the scenery below and her eyes shone like a little girl's.

"Air carriers are made from dragon fossils, aren't they?"

"Yes. The frame is made using metal refined from fossils. The backbone of maritime vessels are called 'keels', which is written with the characters for 'dragon' and 'skeleton', but these here are literally dragon bones."

"Then, the fact that it can fly, is it because the dragons' power still dwells in their bones that have been turned into fossils?"

"Ah, no", the ship's captain, who had been assigned the role of giving explanations, waved his hand for emphasis. "That it can fly in the sky is because it repulses the earth's magnetic field thanks to ether. The metal obtained from refining dragon bones is called dragonstone and is very light, which makes it extremely convenient to use for ships or airships."

On board the ship, Esmena looked around here, there and everywhere, latching on to anyone without a care, and asked them every detail about each new thing one by one. Not a single one of the people who dealt with her wore a troubled expression. It was the princess who was rumoured to be plagued with strange nightmares. It was touching to see that in Esmena's

emaciated face that always wore an air of affliction, her eyes now sparkled with curiosity and liveliness.

The distance between Taúlia and Apta when travelling on a mid-sized air cruiser was no more than half a day's travel however. Before Esmena's curiosity about the sky could be satisfied, the airships welcoming them to Apta appeared to guide the ship.

When Esmena Bazgan alighted from the landing port, a large number of people were gathered in the open space beneath her. Hangings were raised in welcome and as the people of Apta waved their hands, Esmena shyly waved back.

The women of Taúlia exposed their skin as little as possible. From her head, she was covered with a scarf and the long train of the cloth wrapped around her entire body dragged as she walked. Many of the Mephians thought her figure exotic and here and there, sighs of admiration were heard from the crowd. Although for many years they had been bitter enemies – historically, Apta in particular had sustained many assaults from Taúlia – that on this occasion the guest was a young woman helped calm national sentiment.

While feeling nervous at being stared at as though about to be devoured, Esmena didn't forget to fleetingly observe the streets of the castle town. Everything her eyes now alighted on was new and dazzling. Even though it wasn't separated from Taúlia by any great distance, when she thought of a foreign country, she felt like even the indigo blue sky at dusk looked different from the one in her native land.

"Oh. Although I'd heard that the people of Mephius, all of them, were forced to live like slaves to the emperor, everyone here seems to be happy."

"P-Princess", next to her Natokk, the officer serving as escort, was shaken by a violent fit of coughing. "Please don't say something like that in front of the Mephian nobles."

"I am not wrong. Nobody taught me the truth."

Because the nineteen-year old Esmena was in some respects sophisticated, her smile was unclouded. The Taúlian soldiers attributed her flushed cheeks and misty eyes to her excitement at being in a foreign country for the first time, but that wasn't the whole reason.

Naturally, the imperial prince Gil Mephius was in Apta. From some reason, when she thought about that youth, Esmena was unable to calm down. Her heartbeat quickened, and once he appeared in her mind, his figure did not readily disappear from it. Even though she had only met him once in person, that figure had come to mind so many times after she went to bed and prevented her from sleeping.

Esmena's steps were light as she went along the way and her heart was exhilarated.

"You must be tired after your long journey, Lady Esmena. We, the subjects of Emperor Guhl Mephius, welcome you all."

It was not the crown prince who bowed to them in greeting at the entrance of the hall but a girl whom Esmena saw for the first time. She was introduced as Mephius' princess, Ineli Mephius, and Esmena hurriedly returned her greetings. As Ineli guided the guests into the hall, she said: "We are grateful to you for the pains you took in coming here but my brother and the lord of Apta, Gil Mephius, is not well and is currently bedridden."

"Oh dear," Esmena's complexion was observed to cloud over with regret. "Is it quite bad?"

"The illness itself is no great thing. He is merely worried about transmitting it to our guests. Gil Mephius' message to you is that even though he isn't present, Princess, please enjoy yourself at your leisure." Ineli's tone never faltered. "If by good luck he should be feeling better tomorrow, he will pay you a visit to greet you properly, princess."

After which, Esmena was treated to a banquet held in the hall until she was quite worn out. The hurriedly prepared food and drink were ideal, and the military men from Taúlia, starting with Natokk, were amazed at the sword dance performed by Shique and his companions. After all, even if they were called Imperial Guards, they were former gladiators. Because they had a great deal of experience with taking part in performances within the arena, they crossed sword with such splendid timing that it seemed unbelievable that they had trained for it only for a day or two.

As Esmena watched half in fear, half in curiosity while the company of men wielded swords to the rhythm of a drum, Ineli smiled at her,

"As this is the best we can do in this border fortress, you must think more than ever that we of Mephius are unrefined. That this all the hospitality we can offer to a princess from Taúlia makes me feel quite ashamed."

"Not at all. I cannot thank you enough for the amazement you have given us, there isn't a single thing to be ashamed of. As for myself, it is my first time being on Mephian soil and it is so enjoyable that I feel like I will be carried away with all this merrymaking, so if in my ignorance I should do something to cause offence, please do not hold it against me."

Although Esmena had at first regretted the prince's absence, she soon started to have fun chatting with Ineli. The Mephian princess truly had a wealth of topics of conversation and knew of the ancient customs and history of Taúlia. When they talked about what they both liked, she gave the names of all the famous poets from the various Tauran provinces then she and Esmena recited verses they had memorised. Sitting with them was Vileena Owell, who after giving her greetings had remained almost entirely silent.

"Elder sister, which do you know?"

Even though Ineli suddenly asked her that, the princess hardly even knew the poets of her own native country of Garbera. "Er." She could only lower her eyes, feeling extremely bitter about her own lack of culture.

Wanting to take Vileena into consideration, Esmena smiled and brought up a new topic of conversation,

"I would very much like to hear about Garbera also."

Of course, she had mixed feelings towards the girl who would become Gil's lawful wife. However as Esmena was naturally not so foolish as to let those emotions show, not even her rival Vileena had any margin to grasp them.

With nervous look on her face, Vileena brought out the "interesting stories" she had prepared for the occasion. As the fourteen-year-old princess was unused to entertaining, she was also unused to the art of storytelling, and although it could have been charming, as she was extremely ill at ease, it was painful for the onlookers. Above all else, as she told her stories exactly as she had prepared them, her nervousness was transmitted to those around her, which was a bigger problem than the question of having a sense of humour.

From the moment she sensed the atmosphere around her, she snapped her mouth shut and barely opened it again.

On Ineli and Esmena's side of things, the more time they passed together, the closer they became.

"Tomorrow if the weather is fine, how about going down the river Yunos. Of course, I would go with you too."

"Yes, I look forward to it."

Even though there was no clear delineation, the river Yunos had always served as the border between Mephius and Taúlia. That the two princesses should have fun together by riding on the same boat was certainly significant - which is to say that Esmena cheerfully agreed to Ineli's implicit offer. For Esmena, who had few friends of her own age, this would also be a new experience.

Eventually the hour grew late and Esmena was guided to the guest drawing room. Seeing them off with a small bow, Ineli was conscious of Vileena's gaze at her back. As for her, *this* was her greatest victory. There was no doubt that she had accomplished what the Garberan princess could not. Not only that, but it was hugely significant that a princess from Mephius, which was often denigrated as boorish and rustic, had triumphed in this sphere over a princess from Garbera, the country of knights that happened to be known for its refined culture.

Vileena would certainly be distraught at her own powerlessness, Ineli thought as she smugly turned around.

And was surprised to find Vileena closer than she had expected.

"I was impressed."

"Eh?"

"There are many kinds of hardships. For me it would have been impossible to entertain lady Esmena without having her doubt me. I was saved thanks to lady Ineli being here."

"Is, is that so..."

While Ineli was strangely overawed, Garbera's princess nodded to herself a few times. She caught hold of her hand,

"By joining forces, we can overcome this difficulty."

In truth, Vileena was impressed from the bottom of her heart. Ineli felt somewhat embarrassed at having picked a quarrel and put herself on her guard this time.

"Eh? Er, indeed."

Facing her, Ineli could barely maintain a smile.

What is this?

In her heart, she was of course astonished, and also disgusted. Vilena should have long since understood that she had tried to humiliate her at the time of the dance at the Founding Festival. They had exchanged hostile gazes. That they had been exactly like military commanders taking note of each other as they crossed swords had fired her determination.

Hmph,

Ineli inwardly felt contempt anew. This was because mentally she once more carried concealed a sense of superiority towards Vileena.

It's because you believe that the reinforcements will reach Garbera that you can look so carefree.

In other words, neither Gil nor the princess knew yet that sending reinforcements to the princess' native country was tantamount to defying the emperor. In all likelihood, those especially sent reinforcements would be prevented from travelling. Once they found out that Ineli had deliberately failed to disclose the emperor's message to her brother, she would

watch as, in front of her very eyes, they tasted despair and the knowledge that their efforts had been vain.

Honestly, how ridiculously naive. Even if you're good at handling an airship, you know nothing about something like a battle between women.

Her feeling of satisfaction at her victory had had a little cold water poured over it, however for now at least she had regained her sense of self-importance. After this was...,

"Brother, isn't it?"

Ineli stealthily muttered in a low voice.

Chapter 3: The Two Princes of Ende

Part 1

Detached from Ende's main palace, the Swan Shrine - commonly called the Water Shrine, was used for all of the rites connected to the ruler. The attendants formed into groups of several people, spread cloths over the crystal floor, and sat down. The pond beneath them showed through the crystal.

On this evening, both princes of Ende were present. They were the Grand Duke's own children and both were still young. Normally the two of them didn't get along in the slightest but tonight, as a ceremony sponsored by the older brother, Prince Jeremie, was being held to pray for the recovery of the Grand Duke's health, the younger brother prince Eric was unable to absent himself.

Nevertheless, if a person from a foreign country were to see this scene, they would have a very hard time believing that such a ritual was in progress.

Indeed, while flutes and citharas were being played, further in on a stage no higher than a single step, several men and women were dancing, to which the people sitting around raised their wine cups, applauded and cheered. Court serving ladies clad in thin clothes carried food and drinks from one person to another, so that from the outside it looked like an ordinary drinking party.

And yet, this was undoubtedly one of Ende's ceremonies.

Once upon a time, the surrounding region had been known as the territory of the Magic Dynasty of Ende and from that time onwards, a belief in spirits had been deeply ingrained within the duchy. It was thought that if everyone merrily made a ruckus, the « ki » would flow in a favourable direction and summon good spirits and, conversely, evil spirits that polluted the hearts and minds of humans would be driven away.

And so, even if Grand Duke Malchio's health had deteriorated over this past year and he now hardly ever showed himself in an official capacity, even if the situation, including that of the country's future, was becoming worrying, everyone laughed, sang, drained their cups and raised a clamour. Such was the country's character.

However, in the midst of such an important ritual,

Tch.

Of all the people around, Ende's second prince, Eric, was the only one whose expression was unpleasant as he drank gloomily.

This ceremony was sponsored by the first prince, Jeremie. As to where Jeremie was, he was dancing on the stage at the centre of a ring. Furthermore, he had put on makeup along with the Court ladies and was wearing tight-fitting women's clothes into the bargain.

While Jeremie was of a scholarly bent of mind, at times like these he understood how to please. The cross-dressing Jeremie's graceful demeanour attracted shouts of joy. However, Eric considered that this so-called solicitude that led to taking the initiative to create an atmosphere in which everyone could enjoy themselves was a weakness on the part those from the Grand Ducal house. Furthermore, he thought it despicable that at a time when their father Malchio was in danger, his older brother appeared to be ingratiating himself with the powerful nobles.

The floor of the Water Shrine was encrusted with stones that looked like colourful jewels, and the light they emitted repeatedly changed colour. As it reflected off the water of the pond, it created dazzling, dreamlike scenes, yet the stones were a sort of magical tool that made use of ether. However much Ende insisted on its authentic link to the ancient magical dynasty, now that ether was drying up worldwide, using it simply to adorn a ceremony – or, speaking of Jeremie's situation, using it to display his power – could only be seen as squandering it.

It's a power that needs to be saved up so that in case of war, airships can be flown at any time. Wasting it on something like this, how stupid! Well after all, as head of rites, it fits brother's tastes to protect out-dated traditions and faiths.

Inwardly abusing his brother, Eric drank gloomily.

In fact, among the people of Ende who tended to have flamboyant lifestyles and who loved to gaudily adorn themselves, Eric was something of a heretic. Today again he wasn't dressed in particularly resplendent clothes.

Formal dress for the men of Ende consisted of long clothing tied with a sash and with a collar that hung loosely from the body. Men of high status also usually grew their hair long and weaved it into different shapes, affecting the airs of fops. Eric's appearance however saw him in a plain jacket and trousers, with his hair cut to shoulder length.

In both personality and appearance, he was not the type to shine at Ende's Court whose creed was one of beauty and luxury.

And so,

Even today, how much is Jeremie really praying for father's recovery? Every day and every night he invites nobles over like this and they raise a ruckus. Using ceremonies as an excuse, doesn't he only want to consolidate his support base as the successor?

He grew more and more bitter against his brother Jeremie who fit in at the court and who was very much the Ende aristocrat. As he clicked his tongue for the umpteenth time that day,

"You mustn't make that kind of face, Eric."

Without his noticing it, Jeremie had come down from the stage and arrived at his side.

Uh-oh floated in the atmosphere around them, however everyone pretended not to have noticed and kept on drinking. Naturally, at the same time, everyone strained their ears. At present when rumour had it that Grand Duke Malchio might die at any time, an exchange between the two princes stimulated their minds more than food and drink.

"If you don't laugh and behave happily, there is no point to the ritual, is there? Hmm?"

He said as he seemed about to pull his younger brother to the stage, however,

"No, brother. I am such a rustic." Eric's expression was bitter and he didn't look like he was going to get up. "If I were to dance and sing, surely even the benevolent water spirit Ei would be offended."

"What is a successor to the Doria blood doing being so humble? Come now, everyone, my beloved little brother will offer a celebratory performance to Ei."

Jeremie clapped his hands. Hearing the clanging sound from the golden circlets on his wrists, Eric's expression grew increasingly unpleasant.

Showing off gold bangles from Allion.

Belief in spirits wasn't exclusive to Ende, it was also deep-rooted in the large eastern country of Allion. Those metal bangles however were a unique characteristic of Allion's culture that had been handed down from generation to generation. When singing or dancing, they were jangled together to give the impression that there was a greater number of people and the lively atmosphere this created was said to make it easier to call spirits. Although they shared the ancestry of the same magic dynasty, Eric also thought his brother irredeemable for how he was eager to copy Allion's culture in every way.

At 21, Eric was still young. There were other aspects of Ende's aforementioned culture that he had not adapted to. Without adjusting himself to the place's atmosphere, he fell into sullen

silence. Jeremie on the other hand was 25. Seeing his obstinate brother, he uttered "Good grief" and spread out both his hands at the situation. The surrounding retainers were tempted to smile. Even from such a trifling quarrel, comparing himself and his little brother, he would impress upon them how foolish a creature his brother was,

"Well then, though unworthy, I will be the one to offer a celebratory song to Ei."

A man next to Eric stood up.

"And you are?"

"Ah. I am called Belmor Plutos."

With an **Oh-ho**, everyone took notice of this turn of events.

The house of Plutos was a military family that for generations had protected the northern border of Dairan. They had defended the country against the nomads who had long been scattered across the North. The youths of about the same age who formed Eric's entourage were also from families that served the house of Plutos. And so, unusually for Ende that lavishly praised performing arts and decadent beauty, they were men with a rough atmosphere about them. Prince Eric had been entrusted to the Plutos family from early childhood and his background was originally one of being raised in Dairan.

Although among those with nasty tongues it was said that, *Rather than Ende, Lord Eric thus has an air of being a suitable successor for the Plutos family*. Eric's personality that was so unorthodox for the Grand Ducal family had certainly been forged from fighting alongside the warriors from the lands of Dairan, shoulder to shoulder, day after day.

Belmor who had just stood up was the second son of the current head of the Plutos family, and he was Eric's childhood friend. As with the surrounding youths, he was something like a vassal under Eric's direct control.

"So, Belmor Plutos. I shall consecrate a song to Ei. Ei's joy invites Yaman, the spirit of good health, and drives out Jhar, the evil spirit of sickness. Everyone, please forgive me for soiling your ears for a short while."

After this speech, Belmor sang a celebratory song said to invite spirits. While young, a beard covered half of his stern, warrior-like face, yet that voice was so clear one could wonder if it didn't come from a different person. It wasn't simply clear, with its strange traces of childishness, it was a 'cute' voice.

The Court serving maids giggled at that discrepancy while the men also began to cheer as he started to perform an impromptu dance.

Although Eric still looked sour, the ones whose expressions turned bitter were now Jeremie and the vassals who were attempting to win his favour.

The Grand Duchy of Ende's capital, Saphia.

Saphia was popularly called "the Water Capital". Canals ran through the length and breadth of the town, and during the day, gondolas carrying tourists and goods came and went continuously. Naturally bridges were built throughout the town, and as if competing with each other in beauty, each was adorned with various designs.

Nightfall had long since passed. Prince Eric was walking along the brick-paved main street with his vassals. Although horse-drawn carriages had been prepared, they had decided to walk in order to sober up.

Slender pillars lined the main street left and right, and on their top end were spheres of about the size that an adult could hold with both hands. A clear light was emitted by the spheres which illuminated their surroundings brightly and cheerfully. Of course, this too was a waste of ether according to Eric.

That fool.

He cursed sneeringly in his thoughts at Jeremie, who had called out to him as he was about to leave the Water Shrine.

"That's Brother for you. Tonight's ceremony was splendid too. More than gathering good spirits, you must certainly illuminate Ende's future."

"I am happy that you should say so. Tonight was truly enjoyable."

With the make-up removed, Jeremie's face left a surprisingly flat impression. His eyes, nose and lips were thinly shaped, and he himself had a somewhat insipid air to him. At a glance, he did not have the features of what you could call a handsome man, however his appearance improved dramatically with make-up. Just earlier, he had drawn more attention than the ladies-in-waiting and his good looks were such that it would not be inappropriate to call him a peerless beauty for a woman.

He was well aware of that astonishing fact and it was curious how he seemed to have a distinct glamour when he gaudily decorated his smooth, flat face. Eric on the other hand had deeply chiselled features that were in no way comparable to his brother's. He had a prominent high-bridged nose and with it strong, virile features, however those looks did not have the kind of feminine beauty that was lauded at Court.

"Now then, Eric. I heard that you rather curtly turned away messengers from Garbera. It is

painful for me to talk in this way to my younger brother, but do you intend to take such reckless actions until the situation is past repair?"'

"Nothing less from you, Brother. You have sharp ears," because he thought that he would be cornered into an argument over the affair with Belmor, Eric answered with unusual sarcasm. "I would never take reckless actions. This is a reasonable demand against Garbera's rudeness in breaking the betrothal. If we are not given Zaim Fortress, the country's dignity will be tarnished. Did not Father also often say so: a country does not choose its people, the people choose the country. Because Father is ill, if the Grand Ducal House appears to grow timid, someday even the people will abandon it."

Originally a betrothal between Garbera's third princess, Vileena, and Prince Eric had been on the brink of being decided. Garbera was then in the midst of a ten-year war with Mephius. It might have been hoping to break the status quo in the relationship between the three countries by means of that betrothal.

However, Mephius sensed that move. Thereupon, they very quickly offered peace to Garbera. As a result of having weighed the merits of the two countries of Ende and Mephius, Garbera decided to present Princess Vileena to Mephius. The war had spanned ten long years. Perhaps within Garbera there had already been a feeling of weariness with the war. And so, rather than join with Ende to destroy Mephius, and in order to appeal for peace both at home and abroad, they chose to bind themselves to Mephius through a marital connection.

Or perhaps… Prince Eric pondered: perhaps Garbera hesitated to accept Ende's troops within its borders. Unlike Garbera that was damaged by the war, Ende is unscathed. *Did they think we might see it as a good opportunity and attack their capital? They don't trust us, huh. They treat our country as though we were savages*.

In reality, in comparison to the length of Ende's history, it had for the most part not been on particularly good terms with either Mephius or Garbera, for which the underlying cause was that it was a closed, insular country. But the young Eric's thoughts did not extend that far, and even if he had realised it, his rage at having been humiliated probably wouldn't have died down.

"For the people, is it," Jeremie said meaningfully. "However, the betrothal between yourself and the Garberan princess should have been unofficial to the last. If the people were to learn of it after all this time, there will be no uproar to exact revenge upon the insolent Garbera."

"Well now", Eric turned his head, "The people are unexpectedly discerning. It would not be so strange if they had caught wind of something."

Naturally, Jeremie saw through the fact that that was Eric's handiwork. He raised his thin eyebrows.

"Certainly Garbera is currently weakened, but even so, this is not something that can be done with your troops alone. If reinforcements were to come from Mephius, you wouldst be helpless."

"Do not worry. I will only mobilise the ones who approve me. No matter what the result may be, the duchy of Ende's weighty foundations will not waver in the slightest. So please await good news while continuing to hold banquets here in Saphia every night"

That fool.

At that time, he had felt scorn anew for his brother. Jeremie was known as being of the moderate faction, but 'moderate' was to say that he never undertook any action himself. It was equal to the title of coward.

For his part, he had been trying to take action for some time. His brother had misgivings about Mephius and talks were already underway. He had sent messengers time after time to emperor Guhl to get him to promise that he wouldn't interfere with this war against Garbera.

In order to get along well with Mephius from here on, and of course in order also to demonstrate strength worthy of the next successor to Ende, before anything else, he had to win this first war against Garbera.

As Jeremie had said, ten years of war immediately followed by Ryucown's insurrection had left Garbera weakened. Since things were beginning to movie with Ende, troops were being assembled at the border fortress of Zaim, however, according to the scouts he had sent, this was not going smoothly for Garbera. The voices opposed to an alliance with Mephius were still strong, furthermore Zaim was the place where Ryucown, who could be said to be the embodiment of the anti-Mephius faction, had risen up and then fallen. That being the case, Zaim should be a place where Garbera's king, Ainn Owell, would not wish officers and soldiers with even the slightest connection to Ryucown to be sent. If he acted imprudently, internal strife was liable to wreak havoc before even fighting with Ende.

Given its state of affairs, Garbera would want to avoid a drawn-out war – such was Eric's assessment. And all the more so if Mephius in whom they had placed their trust didn't act. Therefore, crushing them from the outset and thereupon being given territories and resources was how he should conclude peace with them. That would be enough as a show of power.

"Belmor", Eric suddenly called out while they were going along the night road.

"Yes?"

"How are the provisions of ether going?"

"I scraped around merchants from the coastal regions and one way or another I was able to

buy some. We'll easily be able to fly a hundred airships."

"So that’s all the ships we'll have to hand," Eric returned an earnest answer even to the joking of his vassal who was in high spirits. However, the warriors who served the Plutos family were used to it. "My brother who cares for nothing except spirits and banquets, I'll show him!"

"Ah. Once we strike at Zaim, even those grandees won't have any choice but to recognise our lord's strength."

They were gallant youths. Their pride and conceit came from having fought day after day against the remote savage tribes of Dairan. They also looked down on the current grandees of Ende who had deliberately sat on the fence during the ten-year war between Mephius and Garbera. The likes of Jeremie had naturally never stood where actual fighting was taking place. If such people were to seize supremacy, Ende would degenerate into a weak country in which only the smell of face powder and perfume would be conspicuous.

"That reminds me, it seems a messenger from Allion wanted to meet you yesterday."

"I was told they would lend assistance" Eric sent a somewhat dark look at the luminous ether spheres. "Well, I gave a suitable answer. If possible, I don't want to borrow Allion's help. It could do what it likes with this current Ende."

Allion was a major power. Under the pretence of lending its strength, it was obvious that it was starting to extend its grasp to the centre of the continent. Did his brother Jeremie who so admired Allion even realise that?

Either way, if Ende didn't stand on its own it would have no future, such was the thought that Eric's heart and mind were intent upon.

As for Mephius, I hear that the war with Taúlia has ended.

Although no hint of it had come out of his mouth, there was slightly troubling information for him.

Guhl deliberately sent a small force to Apta to create a chance for Taúlia's army to attack. And when war broke because of that, he was probably going to use it as a pretext for not sending reinforcements to the allied country of Garbera...

As the lights overhead cast Eric's deeply chiselled features into shadow, his expression was concealed even from the nearby Belmor.

It's said that Taúlia attacked Apta twice and then, by some process or another, they immediately reached an alliance.

The lord of Apta castle was Gil Mephius. The crown prince of whom there had not been a single good report. In fact, the neighbouring countries had considered that the day that man became emperor, Mephius that was so proud of its military valour would inevitably be weakened. And yet, from the time of his first campaign when he had subjugated Ryucown, that name had occasionally come to be heard.

Even if it was a fluke, or even if he is blessed with good retainers, he must be a man with exceptionally good luck.

His expression morose, Eric continued walking.

Part 2

That fool.

Jeremie for his part was sneering at his younger brother.

He was in one of the rooms of the main palace. An embroidery of gold and silver thread on black velvet was spread over the walls and three-cornered shelves were crammed with books, rare old ones as well as new publications. It was Jeremie's personal study.

The banquet had ended half an hour ago. Within the wine cup that Jeremie was turning on his palm was something that hadn't been served at the feast earlier, namely black water lily powder of which he had added a single pinch.

That cur, I gave him advice as he was leaving and he openly looked down on me.

At that time, Jeremie truly lamented that his younger brother was popular due to his meritorious military service. However, in truth it could be said that the current situation was progressing entirely according to his expectations.

It seemed like Eric was pretending to be enraged at Garbera for going back on the alliance agreement, but of course that probably wasn't his only reason for rising to action. He must be impatient now that Grand Duke Malchio's life was at risk and that it was rumoured that he chosen his eldest son Jeremie as a worthy successor to Ende, and because of that was in a hurry to show off his strength in front of the vassals.

Regarding the next successor as the Grand Duke, Jeremie had not himself clearly obtained his father's agreement. However, he had deliberately set about the rumour that he seemed to have been chosen. And when the vassals asked him whether this was true or not, he did not deny it outright.

"Really, you shouldn't hurry too much. I too am still green. Grand Duke Malchio Le Doria needs to remain in good health until I have grown to adulthood." He would say some such thing and smile.

Whether it was circulating the information of Garbera's current weakening, or whether it was encouraging his little brother's self-conceit by pretending not to know about the exchange of promises between Mephius and Eric, all of it was for the sake of getting his brother to take military action.

As had become clear at this evening's ritual, Eric was not popular at Court. Even though he

was not hated or shunned, he was a man who was poor at both laying the groundwork and at flattery. He was not the type to be able to navigate through the Court, where, beneath the flowery words that flitted all about, money and suspicious transactions whirled.

Since he himself understood that, he usually retired to the northern region of Dairan.

After all, he is more suited to riding horses there and waving his sword at barbarians.

"However, that Dairan..."

As spoke the name of that place, Jeremie's thin lips twisted slightly. As Dairan could be said to be Eric's base of power, it could also be said to be the only region that was a nuisance to Jeremie. It had its own local particularities and the people who were gathered there were different in nature from those of Ende's centre. That place was completely unlike Jeremie's predilection, which was for the scent of face powder and perfume, the swirling of intrigue and desire; there it was fodder and steel, the stench of gunpowder hung over it and swordsmanship and valour were praised.

That land is an obstacle to my becoming Grand Duke.

The problem wasn't that the northern border risked being breached but that, even supposing Eric were to take a step away from the power struggle, the warriors from that region who could not accept Jeremie might appoint Eric as their leader and raise the banner of revolt. But say he were to decide to treat Eric in a way that kept him away from Dairan, in that case his dissatisfaction and that of the people of Dairan might grow even more violent.

Although Jeremie disdained his younger brother as 'a man without a brain', his existence itself was something he had never made light of.

"Are you there, Hezel?"

"Yes."

Behind Jeremie, something like a black spot could be seen to materialise and shift into the shape of a black-clad human being. Although its arrival was such that one could only think that it had appeared by assimilating with the shadows, or perhaps by teleportation, Jeremie didn't seem surprised.

"Eric is finally sending forces towards Garbera. How did the divination for their success come out?"

"Because many matters are not settled, the details are as though covered by dark clouds and cannot be seen. However this war will by certainly not be a disadvantageous move for Prince Eric."

"Really, it can't be said that sorcery is convenient to use!"

Ende's "Bureau of Sorcery" was a special organisation that wasn't to be found in other countries. Composed of 32 sorcerers in all, it had connections to the political centre only through the reliance and requests of the Grand Ducal house and the nobles. Although it was called sorcery, it couldn't achieve the various kinds of miracles – blowing away a mountain, cleaving straight through the ocean – that were brought forth during the ancient magic dynasty of king Zodias. At most it was to a degree where they divined the future through the agency of spirits, supervised festivals or functions handed down from ancient times, and, because they were well-versed in geography, history, medicine, philosophy and every kind of learning, bestowed their varied wisdom on statesmen.

Although it was said that among them there were those possessing the power to move boulders or to produce fog, but it was well-nigh impossible to use them for things like assisting with public engineering works or for gaining an advantage in war. Besides, they were said to be uninterested in politics, or even in the very life and death of Ende itself.

Furthermore, their foreknowledge of the future was no more than a sort of fortune-telling or prediction. Because the Bureau of Sorcery was said to have amassed all possible knowledge from the creation of the universe to the present day, their predictions that were backed by this knowledge had unusually strong authority, however what Jeremie currently wanted was a clear picture of the future.

Aware of what was on his mind, the man dressed in black called Hezel elaborated in more detail,

"As I stated previously, it is first of all a fact that Garbera has been weakened by Ryucown's rebellion. There is still a large number of people opposed to the alliance with Mephius and there is a trend amongst those who did not rush to take part in his uprising to openly view him a hero."

"Hmm", Jeremie assented. He had deliberately diverted that information towards Eric.

In addition, Ende – or rather, Jeremie – had also participated in Ryucown's rebellion. When Ryucown was going to rise to action, it was at Jeremie's own discretion that a secret messenger was received at Ende's Court. He had promised to supply Zaim with goods and provisions, and by prolonging Ryucown's life as much as possible, he intended to entrap Garbera into chaos.

After which, would he aim for Mephius or would he aim for the weakened Garbera? In any case, he had judged that this would be an opportunity to break the stalemate between the three countries.

In other words, although in comparison to his younger brother, Jeremie was rumoured to be of

the moderate faction, in fact that calmly deliberate prince had taken action earlier than Eric.

Hezel continued,

"Furthermore, however much the newly appointed protector of Zaim, Prince Zenonn Owell, is a military commander of considerable repute, he is not particularly shrewd. And he is on bad terms with Noue Salzantes, who displays exceptional innate intelligence. Garbera's king made a mistake in his choice of who to send. Since those two are unable to work well together, they will not be able to make a full demonstration of power. As long as talented people have a good affinity for each other, even if they are individually weak, together they can multiply their strength two or three times over. Those two however will drag each other down and neither will be able to demonstrate even half of their natural abilities."

"I see. Everything is to my brother's advantage and is further developing to his advantage."

Jeremie drank a mouthful of the wine cup's contents and savoured the taste. For a moment he closed his eyes in ecstasy at that stimulus then,

"Well then", he opened his eyes. "Should we hasten 'this' development too? It seems the time and opportunity for Eric to cross over the border without the Grand Duke's permission and invade a foreign country will match up."

"Prince Eric's military manoeuvres should however receive your father's approval."

"Hezel."

"Yes."

"You said that the Bureau of Sorcery wants a large amount of monetary financing."

"Yes."

"There is no precedent for the Bureau of Sorcery negotiating directly with the people of the Grand Ducal House. Sorcerers are careful not to be pulled into vulgar strife and be tainted by it. Therefore, if this should be leaked around, not only you but the continued existence of the Bureau itself would be at risk. Whereas an ordinary person would have flatly turned down your proposal, I generously agreed to be linked to you through a shared secret."

"At that time, I was greatly impressed."

Beneath the thick hood that he wore, Hezel seemed to be made of shadows and his features were indistinguishable. He merely lowered his head.

"A month ago, Father's condition took a sudden turn. It was a good opportunity for Eric, and

he falsified Father's words that were originally opposed to his army's march. And after Eric has marched, I will hear of this from Father's own mouth as he lies on his sickbed. Is that not so?"

"Yes", once again, Hezel bowed his head in praising assent. "Then, will you, Prince, also mobilise soldiers?"

"My role is merely to rebuke my younger brother on his return. If I were to mobilise soldiers now, I would be the same as him. However, I recently heard a disquieting rumour. They say that a large number of wild dragons have been sighted near Dairan."

His back turned to Hezel, Jeremie's eyes seemed to gaze at something far away.

"Fafnir," Hezel muttered from behind him.

When Jeremie heard that, he shook and his thin lips formed into a smile.

Jeremie had only recently drawn closer to the Bureau of Sorcery. The purpose he had had researched in exchange for a large amount of monetary financing was related to dragons. Unlike Mephius and the western provinces of Tauran, in Garbera and Ende dragons were made almost no use of in war. This was largely related to the fact that there were no habitats for dragons in the vicinity, but Jeremie had perused secret books from the ancient magic dynasty and had discovered that there had once been a way to manipulate dragons through sorcery.

Jeremie had many times and without permission searched through the artefacts in the underground treasury and had the people of the Bureau of Sorcery test the effects of ether on them. Artefacts – vessels for sorcery – that had been handed down from the ancient era of the Magic Dynastic were the symbol of the Grand Duchy of Ende and not even a prince was allowed to take them out as he pleased.

But Jeremie had entrusted them to the Bureau of Sorcery under the veil of secrecy. Eventually they would be able to do something close to what was written in the secret books. By bringing together and studying the descriptions from the books, they hoped to recreate something like the ancient vessels of sorcery.

And thus, they had recently arrived at a prototype. Jeremie had purchased several dragons from merchants of the coastal countries and had immediately tested the vessel's effectiveness.

As anticipated, although it couldn’t perfectly control the movements of violent wild dragons, it was possible even at the current stage to guide them to a certain extent. Training dragons for military use took time and above all else was always accompanied by risks. However, with no more than this one vessel, it was possible at all times to throw an enemy into chaos by directing dragons towards them.

Jeremie had called the dragons manipulated in that way "Fafnir".

"Although my pitiful little brother will fight hard in Garbera's territory and will certainly obtain meritorious achievements, on his return, he will be publicly disgraced after being charged with the crime of having falsified the Grand Duke's words in order to arbitrarily take military action. In addition to which, while most of the soldiers were away from Dairan, the retainers to the Plutos family will have been tragically attacked and massacred by wild dragons – it appears something like that might happen."

As though toasting an invisible partner, Jeremie lifted his wine cup in the air.

Both Eric's political and military power would be largely whittled away. If he wanted to continue living in the Grand Duchy of Ende, he would have no choice but to rely on Jeremie. As the commander who, with Jeremie's backing, would lead the military after the deaths of the Plutos family's retainers, even his little brother would surely become a useful sword for "Grand Duke Jeremie".

"If this war between Garbera and Eric were to extend indefinitely, so much the better. I will be able to deal with the increasingly weakened Garbera with my own hands."

The night wore on for the two princes of Ende, each filled with their respective expectations.

Three days later, a disturbance occurred near Mephius' border.

Part 3

Well, even if it was called a disturbance, it wasn't a problem between Mephius and Ende. It was near Garbera's border, but it wasn't that hostilities had broken out earlier than the two princes had anticipated.

It could be said to be a problem internal to Mephius, but it was something that would have a huge effect on the actions of both countries of Ende and Garbera.

It happened as the iron-mask-wearing Kain, his adjutant Gowen, the commander of the infantry Pashir and the remaining of the one hundred suitable imperial guards that were led by them were approaching the Nouzen Mountains.

Although the Nouzen Mountains were not a particularly high mountain range, they were the border that divided Ende to the North and Garbera to the South, while on the Western edge of the mountains, both countries bordered Mephius. Until Garbera had gained control of Zaim Fortress, it had been a place where a powerful clan of mountain bandits had set up a fort, but now, because the territories of three countries touched there, it lay quietly as a buffer zone between them. Criminals from each country escaped there, partly because the mountains and valleys created a complicated topography, but it was also rumoured that they gathered and banded together at the ruins of that powerful clan's fortress.

Gowen had planned to bring the ship down for a while at the entrance of the Nouzens. Letting themselves purposely be discovered by Ende's troops would cause the enemy to falter in its march. However just before he could do so, they suddenly received an order to halt.

The company of airships that appeared overhead was from neither Ende nor Garbera; the flag that fluttered at their stern was none other than that of Mephius.

Still, they couldn't fight so Gowen reluctantly obeyed the order.

The ship descended and a large group on horseback approached the cruiser. At their head was Odyne Lorgo. One of Mephius' twelve generals, five hundred fully armed members of his Silver Ax Division waited in his rear.

"What is your business here?"

"That's my line."

In answering Gowen, Odyne didn't hide his contempt for a former sword slave.

Thirty-seven years old. A commander with a long military service whose forte lay in strategies that made full use of guns. He himself was an excellent shot. At the Founding Festival a few years ago, he had unerringly blown away jars placed on the heads of slaves in the stadium.

Incidentally, he was the father of Ronnie Lorgo, the girl who had taken part in the coming-of-age ceremony of this year's Founding Festival by straddling a dragon.

"We are the Imperial Guards under the prince's direct control. Since you halted our progress, you must have a suitable reason, right?"

"Well, do I now?" A contemptuous smile flitted over Odyne's cruel-looking face. "That being the case, we received direct orders from His Majesty the Emperor. No matter who it may be, no one is currently to cross over Mephius' border."

Signs of unrest spread through the Imperial troops in the sky above Gowen. It was rumoured that, Odyne, who was currently looking on in satisfaction, held no kind feelings towards Prince Gil who had appointed slaves as Imperial Guards and who had employed a troop made out of Pashir and the sword slaves who had risen in rebellion.

"No matter who it may be – that's right, even the prince's Imperial Guards or the man who became the hero Clovis at the Founding Festival."

He threw a glare at Kain, who almost started trembling violently. Gowen stepped forward on behalf of the overwhelmed Kain.

"We aren't on some childish errand. While I send a messenger to the prince, we will anchor here for a while."

"Ho, in this situation you say that you cannot retreat? In the first place, Prince Gil should have received strict orders from His Imperial Majesty not to move a single soldier from Apta. His Majesty will be furious at His Highness the prince for defying that order. As for every one of you lot, who knows what kind of torture you'll be put through."

"We do not know about it. We do not follow His Majesty's orders; we are the prince's Imperial Guards to the last. I will send a message to inform His Highness of His Majesty's intentions and will then wait for His Highness' answer."

Even though he was being stared at intently by a valiant general with a long military record, Gowen's complexion didn't change in the slightest. Even though both then stayed silent for a while, their blade-like glares connected as with the sound of swords clashing.

"Do what you want", Odyne sneered while turning his horse back around. "But we will keep watch from a nearby encampment. If you appear to be about to disobey this order, know that

no matter who it may be, there will be no forgiveness. Be thoroughly steeled in your resolve."

Having conveyed that one message, Odyne left with his subordinates in tow and a short while later, an encampment was set up near the halted cruiser in order to keep watch on it.

"Gowen, what will we do?" Kain asked in a low voice. "We don't have any time. Like Orba said, if Ende and Garbera start their war, with our tiny numbers, it'll be pointless even if we rush in."

"We can't do anything but wait."

While they were to rush to Garbera as reinforcements, naturally they couldn't exchange fire with their own country of Mephius. Gowen sent a messenger on horseback. In a situation such as this involving long distances, because there was the issue of fatigue, a horse was more reliable than an airship.

The faces of the soldiers seeing off the messenger were dark with unease.

'*This' is Mephius after all*.

Among them, only Pashir sported a fearless smile on his lips. From the start he had been a man whose grudge would not be cleared no many how many times he burned the country to the ground. Forcefully blocking reinforcements sent to an allied country was entirely like Mephius, he jeered inwardly.

Now then, how will that eccentric prince move?

Putting his hand to the pommel of the sword that hung at his waist, he directed his gaze to the western sky were Apta lay. There were aspects of that prince, who seemed calm and collected yet got drunk and pointed a sword at a vassal, that Pashir couldn't gauge on the slightest.

No, maybe I...

Maybe he had hopes of him.

The sun set before long. The cruiser and Odyne's encampment that had been established not even a kilometre away seemed to be glaring at each other. Standing at the bow of the warship, Gowen felt his nose tickled by the cool, tension-filled night air.

Some twenty kilometres east of there. The southern Nouzen Mountains were east of the River Wendt that flowed from Lake Olivis in the north. In Zaim Fortress by Garbera's border, Noue Salzantes received the news.

They were prevented from travelling?

Emperor Guhl Mephius did not overlook the reinforcements sent by the prince, which naturally meant that one could consider that there existed some connection between his country of Mephius and Ende. Of course this wasn't something completely unanticipated for Noue. In all likelihood, the same went for Gil Mephius.

He is not the sort of naïvely honest man to withdraw just from this.

Noue was going to believe a bit longer in the man named Gil that he had observed in Solon and then in Apta. He was possessed of the ability to end the war with Ax Bazgan with just a handful of troops. Above all else, he had crushed Noue's own strategy in Solon.

Naturally however, not everyone in Garbera shared Noue's sentiments.

"You see? This is why you can't trust Mephius!"

His face twisted in a truly venomous expression, Zenonn Owell was currently furious.

Garbera's second prince was the commander of the Knights of the Order of the Tiger. At seventeen, the year that the war with Mephius first started, he had achieved glory in his first campaign. It had been ten years since then. Having himself crossed swords a great many times with Mephius, even now he still hadn't been able to accept the likes of a peace obtained by giving away a princess.

He and Vileena were close as siblings. The prince also had soft platinum hair and, from time to time, an indomitable expression exactly like hers flitted across his handsome, clean-cut face. In terms of personality also, they were similarly stubborn.

"Vileena. It's fine if you dislike this."

Zenon, who had been stationed to the West in Malvant when the marriage to Mephius had been coming together and who had expressly rushed back to Phozon, the capital, told his sister.

"Not even I wish for this war to end like this. Emperor Guhl will definitely be defeated in Mephius at your brother's hands. If you're hesitating to come forward, I'll speak to His Majesty on your behalf and..."

"No, Brother" Vileena looked straight at Zenon and shook her head. "I'm going to Mephius."

His sweetly smiling sister left Zenon at a loss for words.

He placed his hands on the shoulders of his little sister who had steeled her resolve for their

country's sake. At that, the serving maids who were standing around them in a wide circle broke into sobs. It was too heart-wrenching for them that the fourteen-year-old princess would very soon be married into an enemy country, and moreover one known to be as barbaric as Mephius.

Although the siblings were far apart in age, Zenon had been Vileena's close playmate from when she had been much younger than she was now. They would drag their surroundings into their games of tag or have mock duels with wooden swords or toy guns. As he purposely let himself be defeated, Zenon would laugh cheerfully,

"Vileena, it's not too late even now. Dress like a man and live like a man. When you become an adult, you'll be a valiant general far above compare to this brother of yours."

He often said that. For those who knew the two of them, the sight of those siblings gazing at each other for long interval moved them all the more to tears.

Thus, when despite the fact that they should have been tied together by an alliance, the other party failed to reward the princess' resolve by being reluctant to send reinforcements when Garbera was in danger, many of the Garberan people, starting with Zenon, were enraged.

Meanwhile,

"If Mephius was intending to send reinforcements, could it be that they are hesitating after having seen Ende's preparations?"

The one who addressed Noue was Rogier Gilant, a cavalry captain dispatched by the Knights of the Order of Bronze. He was a young man who had previously been stationed at Apta with Noue.

At present, with five hundred from the Knights of the Order of the Tiger and two hundred and fifty apiece from the Knights of the Orders of Black Steel and of Bronze, roughly a thousand soldiers were stationed at Zaim.

The "preparations" that Rogier spoke of were the strange measures taken by prince Eric. The prince had readied upwards of two thousand soldiers. Without worrying about maintaining warriors to watch over Dairan, Eric had gathered mercenary soldiers – in this case, they were warriors who had left their master's house and who were also known as ronin – within Ende and had also borrowed some from the generals who had offered him their assistance.

As a suitable time for marching drew ever closer, why then had Eric first marched off six hundred soldiers and stationed them along the border with Mephius?

The unit hadn't stirred after that. As it was a location that somewhat veered away from a direct route to Zaim, they couldn't be a party of vanguards either.

"That military unit is probably for guarding against reinforcements from Mephius. Prince Eric also knows that the country of Mephius isn't a united monolith and deliberately left a party to stare them down."

"If that's the case", Noue said while looking at the flow of the river Wendt from one of the fort's windows, "how does he expect to do it?"

"Pardon my insolence, but by dispatching a troop in the Nouzen Mountains and by having them pass through a road that doesn't collide with the enemy's main force, can we not have that troop at hand to attack them from the flank? In that situation, in concert with the Mephian reinforcements, we could attack them from both sides. Then moving South along with the reinforcements, we could also catch the main body of prince Eric's troops in a pincer movement while it advances towards Zaim."

"That's saying that it is easy to penetrate into the Nouzens," muttered Noue as he placed his slender, feminine-looking fingers to his chin and muttered. A lapis lazuli ring shone on his forefinger.

The peaks and ridges of the Nouzen Mountains were riddled with numerous ravines whose hideously complicated shapes turned the area into a maze. Advancing several hundred soldiers, and furthermore spreading them out so that they wouldn't be discovered by the enemy's main force, would both take time and result in many broken bones.

"Besides", Noue continued to survey the river's surface, "Say we swooped down on that unit along the border, what would we do if the enemy perhaps escaped by crossing the border into Mephius?"

"Crossing... the border?"

"I had thought Eric to be lacking in wit, however it seems I will have to revise that perception. In all likelihood, that unit is..."

"What idiocy are you blabbing on about?"

Zenon Owell step forward in a clang of his knightly accoutrement. Rogier sat up straight and even Lord Salzantes turned around and bowed.

"If we depend on reinforcements from Mephius now, then what will happen? It's as clear as day they betrayed the alliance with us. On the other hand, this is a good opportunity. We will use that as a reason to take Vileena back. That the wedding ceremony still hasn't taken place is also an offence. It looks like after Ende it'll be them next."

"Yes."

The two of them could only answer together.

The prince himself is by no means a bad general but, his eyes lowered, Noue's brilliant mind whirled, in this situation, it would be preferable to have a foolish general that I could easily manipulate.

Zenon was also a general who had accomplished a great many feats during the ten-year war. However right now, his violent emotions had leapt to the forefront. His animosity had not remained confined to Mephius and those violent emotions were now aimed at Ende. When the decision to marry Vileena to Mephius had caused friction with Ende, at the king's command, Zenon himself had gone there as envoy.

As Grand Duke Malchio and he had then vowed steadfast friendship, Zenon no doubt felt disgraced by prince Eric's current aggressive actions.

In addition to his already being irritated, Zenon didn't place much trust in Noue. Although he was now dead, Zenon naturally detested Ryucown for rebelling at such an important time. The one who had counselled the king to appoint Ryucown to a position of power was Noue. And the position he had laid the foundation for had been none other than that of Vileena's bridegroom.

"I can't trust that pretty-boy," Zenon had publicly declared. "I do not believe that a knight's honour lies in excelling in ingenious tricks. No matter how resourceful one maybe, military arts and a wholesome spirit must come together. It's impossible to believe in a man whose forte lies in surprise attacks."

Zenon was the epitome of the Garberan soldier who recklessly followed the path of chivalry so he was disinclined to listen to the wisdom that Noue could confer at this time.

So many restrictions.

Zaim was originally a fortress in which two thousand soldiers could be stationed at all times. It could also accommodate five battleship-class air carriers. However the soldiers at hand were half of that while the available ships were only two cruisers class and a single carrier that functioned as a supply ship.

As far as Noue was concerned, this was also a restriction.

It was absolutely as the sorcerer from Ende, Hezel, had judged. King Ainn Owell was afraid of internal divisions. Therefore he wasn't able to allot a great many soldiers to Zaim, the land where Ryucown had rebelled.

Ryucown had been at the core of the airship forces. He had been charismatic. And there were many young officers in the airship forces. So as they had to avoid giving them any

provocation, he had had no choice but to appoint Prince Zenon as commander of Zaim. The ships that were there were also Zenon' own property.

In these situations, generals who personally relied on me would follow my judgement.

As far as Noue was concerned, soldiers were chess pieces and he thought of even generals as puppets that could be manoeuvred through his intelligence. However when confronted with a situation that didn't go as he wanted, even someone as self-confident as he was couldn't help but regret the way he had done things until then.

No matter how brilliant a stratagem I come up with, it's no better than empty prattle if I don't have the manpower to implement it.

That being the case, he didn't have the leisure not to call directly on Mephius for reinforcements. Whatever Emperor Guhl's intentions might be, it should be possible to shake up the leading Mephian nobles. If a direct appeal for reinforcements was made by an allied country, those capable of influencing the emperor would surely step forward.

The Garberan royal court however wouldn't do this. It was unthinkable to bow their heads before the enemy they had fought during the ten-year war. The nobles at Court repeatedly said that "The pride of Knights won't allow it."

If pride is to hasten towards death, you should meet your end soon enough, Noue thought bitterly.

The current situation was absurd. It was all the more exasperating as he judged that he had brought if on himself by overestimating his own intelligence.

"Even the shine of a lapis lazuli is due to polishing."

Zenon muttered absentmindedly as he left, looking at the ring on Noue's forefinger.

A lapis lazuli's beauty was drawn out by it being polished. If one neglected study and forgot to train, no matter how many accomplishments they might have, they would not shine. Such was Noue's own creed and the reason why he wore that ring. He realised now that he himself had been on the verge of losing that meaning.

However...

Naturally he wasn't simply lazing around grumbling inwardly.

Noue was moving forward with what he was best at. About half a month ago, he had appealed for assistance from the inhabitants living on the outskirts of the Nouzen Mountains and had built a fort that would serve as a decoy at the centre of the mountainous area. He

intended to send Zans, an infantry captain from the Knights of the Order of Black Steel, there along with three hundred soldiers.

"We should be able to lure them with that."

Noue Salzantes wore his usual scornful smile while his eyes betrayed nothing but a flicker of impatience.

Chapter 4: Birthplace

Part 1

The messenger reached Apta three days later. He had travelled by changing post horses and had even flown by airship from a nearby relay station. Naturally the news he brought had been sent directly to Prince Gil's private chambers.

As ever however, Gil had received the report from behind his door and he still hadn't left his room.

The troop of reinforcements had been impeded by their own country of Mephius – such were the contents of the message and that news flew around Apta. As the wave of surprise spread, Ineli Mephius gloated to herself. Just as planned, she had been able to fire a shot in retaliation against Prince Gil whose unaccountable actions had recently left everyone astounded.

"Elder Sister, you must be so worried about your native country," she said insincerely to Princess Vileena.

Knowing that the people around her were watching for her reaction, Vileena didn't allow her expression to change. Because Shique understood that naturally that stemmed from her sense of duty as royalty, he somewhat forcefully visited Gil's private chambers to stir him to action, but was repelled each time.

As for Orba...

When he heard the message, he had slammed the wall in irritation.

That damn Guhl!

Orba's temper flared. The crown prince who in shouldering the burden of Mephius had intended to accomplish his duty by sending the reinforcements was obstructed by the very emperor of Mephius.

Joining hands in an alliance, claiming that the peace is for the sake of the people, but in the end it's just for the sake of his own interests, he really is self-serving in using others.

Such was a statesman, a so-called man of power. Orba loathed their sort.

However as the prince, he couldn't let his anger towards the emperor guide his actions. Instead, it made him look back on past tyrannies he had suffered and only increased his personal hatred towards Oubary.

Is the emperor saying that he won't let his son run loose anymore? It'll be troublesome if he sends a messenger directly to Apta. I can't waste any time. Should I attack Oubary by surprise then disappear? He thought.

The "prince" couldn't leave any trace of his own involvement. In that way, trouble wouldn't fall on other people. He stood still for a long time, gripping his knees. Losing touch with reality, he started to think that this was the best solution.

While Orba was in the middle of strengthening that resolve,

"Your Highness Gil. May I come in?"

Princess Vileena, without going through an intermediary, spoke from directly on the other side of the door.

Orba raised his head with a jerk and for some reason held his breath as though being targeted by an enemy. He could imagine what her business was. It would naturally be about the reinforcements. Because of that, right now, he didn't want to meet with her.

I need to run!

He was probably also aware that when he was confronted with those frank eyes, he wasn't able to put up a front. As much as he hated the imperial family and those in power, Orba was currently identical to them in one of those aspects that he detested, that of giving priority to his own affairs.

Responsibilities.

From the other side of memory, Gowen's words echoed and resounded. From the time he had decided to wear the prince's mask the responsibilities that went with it had weighed on him. However as he was now, Orba was trying to disregard them and run away. Therefore,

Enough. What a joke. What about responsibilities? This originally began when a noble of Mephius gave me a new mask. For his own ambitions! I'm ending this idiocy. I'll throw the mask away. Enough is enough!

Tightly clenching his fists, Orba was going to continue to ignore Vileena's voice but surprisingly after that the princess didn't say anything and went away from the door.

Feeling deflated, Orba stared at the darkness within his room.

Ke – a sound that wasn't quite laughter escaped from his lips.

Pitiful.

Running away, putting up his guard, only for nothing to happen except his being left behind. It felt like the enveloping darkness had become a mirror and was flaunting the image a tiny, wretched boy.

The choice of attacking Oubary by surprise which, just a short while ago, had been glowing with a dark appeal now seemed utterly pointless and hideously childish.

There's no way. If I throw everything away and only act on my own selfish desires, I really will become just like Oubary and the Mephian emperor.

And more than anything, my feelings won't be settled from simply snatching his life away. Acting as the prince to the end, to find a way so that the soldiers Vileena and I employed won't be harmed while snatching everything away from him...

A strange change was occurring at that time within Orba. Unlike when he had been morbidly thinking of nothing except killing Oubary, now that he had deliberately chosen a more difficult path, Orba's mind was much clearer than before, the many emotions that had been whirling around had come together, and he was able to maintain his concentration as he wracked his brains to elaborate plans that would overcome the various obstacles along his way.

"Your Highness."

Orba lifted his head at the new voice. It wasn't the princess, nor was it a messenger. It was a report from a soldier Orba had previously given direct orders to.

Having his thoughts interrupted was unpleasant and Orba had begun to bluntly turn him away, but -

"Wait," Orba's sharp voice reverberated through the darkness. He opened the door, "What did you say just now?"

The one he was talking to was of the Imperial Guards. When he had previously had them investigate Apta's territory, he had left a number of soldiers in the various villages. Their intelligence gathering had now proved successful.

"Yes. We have located the bandits' hideout. I have come to offer you the report."

These bandits were the ones who has attacked Orba and his group as they were proceeding on their way to Apta. From village rumours and from the locations of actual attacks on caravans of Mephian merchants, they had been able to infer their hideout. Moreover, as among the villagers there were some that regarded them as heroes, they had been able to learn the name of the bandits' leader.

When Orba heard that, he handed out a cash reward, saying, "Right. Distribute this among everyone."

As he closed the door behind him, the expression in his eyes as they traced the darkness had changed. Even though they gave off the same feeling of blazing, the light that shone through them was so coolly calculating as to appear chillingly cold.

I lost everything.

He crossed the room and pulled open the curtains that covered the window, and letting moonlight shine through the window and bathe the room. Exactly as though he were throwing down a challenge, Orba stood stock still, clenching his fists so strongly that it looked as though blood would start trickling through his fingers at any moment.

So I'll make him lose everything too. His life alone would just be half-hearted. His honour, his future, everything he cares about, everything, I'll drag it down into the blood and the mud.

Those eyes overflowed with a blazing light. As though to avoid a confrontation, the moonlight that had been gently shining into the room hid behind the clouds and disappeared from sight.

The next morning.

Esmena Bazgan had finished her one-week stay and was about to return home. Ineli, with whom she had deepened her friendship in that time through boating down the river, tea parties and such, came to see her off and Esmena's eyes misted over tearfully as she took her hand.

"Your Imperial Highness. May I hope to meet with you again?"

"Don't be so distant, Elder Sister." Even while she sadly drew her eyebrows together, the smile never left Ineli's face. Unannounced, she had slipped in a promise of sisterhood. "This time, I will be the one to invite you, Elder Sister, to Solon. Relations with Taúlia will surely improve by the day, so that time won't be far off."

"Yes", Esmena nodded in agreement, "I look forward to it."

Having easily been able to receive all the messengers from another country, Ineli's confidence in her own abilities had increased. This was something that was also related to the future. Ineli had no desire for a life in which she would merely become someone's wife and share their fate. Rather that that, she thought that a life in which she could move a country herself according to her own desires would be much more amusing.

There was a stir in the crowd. Natokk, Esmena's appointed bodyguard was instantly taken aback and even Ineli stared wide-eyed.

"Prince," Esmena's cheeks turned red in a flash. Arriving astride a white horse was Gil Mephius. Surprised at this sudden turn of events, she stuttered, "H-Has, your, your health improved?"

"I apologise for making you worry. Moreover, even though you expressly took the trouble of coming here, I was unable to do anything for you."

"N-Not at all", Esmena shook her head so vigorously that she seemed likely to snap her slender neck, "I, Esmena, feel that I have received great kindness from you simply by being able to meet you in this way."

"I am grateful that you should say so." Gil smiled faintly. He dismounted and took a package that had been tied to his saddle, presenting it to Esmena. "This is the proof of Mephius' alliance with your father - no, with Taúlia. I hope that from here on we will have a close association with Taúlia."

"Ye-Yes."

Esmena's feelings were transparent to Ineli as she watched her look dazed and dreamy. At the same time however, her brother who had suddenly appeared didn't understand them at all. As the airship Esmena was riding on disappeared from sight in the sky, she called out to him with a smile.

"Brother, you seem fully recovered. Could we eat supper together later?"

"No." Gil replied tersely and the smile he had shown earlier was gone.

"Could it be that you are angry? Because I didn't clearly pass on the emperor's message?"

Since it was something that would sooner or later come out, Ineli did her best to speak innocently. Gil however had already turned his back to her. Furious emotion blazing up within her, she continued,

"Still, as ever your timing in appearing was excellent. Princess Esmena will probably never forget this morning for as long as she lives. By doing as you did, you made everyone worry

then in the end came and surprised them; you've loved doing that since a long time ago."

"..."

At that moment, Gil Mephius, or rather Orba, was preoccupied with other things. His head was filled with plans for what to do from then on and he was bored of playing her brother in front of Ineli. And so he made a mistake that he would not normally make.

"Do you remember? It was before Mother became the emperor's consort. I think it was at the time of my twelfth birthday. Although Your Highness had promised to come to the party, you were nowhere to be seen. Everyone was disappointed, especially me. But then when the party was almost over, you suddenly appeared and gave me a magnificent present."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. Do you remember what that present was?"

"Who knows. It was a long time ago."

"It was a wine cup made entirely of precious jewels. You said that it was in advance of the day when we would be able to drink together."

"I remember. You're right."

When Orba unthinkingly said that, both sides of Ineli's plump lips suddenly curled upwards.

"Oh", as she hid her mouth behind the back of her hand, Ineli's eyes went round. "I remembered wrongly, Brother. If I'm not mistaken, the one who gave me the jewel wine cup was the son of the previous lord of Kilro. He was so pompous. It seems he lost his life in that recent slave revolt, so let us pray that he finds happiness in the next world. Oh my, but still, it is most strange that you, Brother, had the exact same mistaken memory."

"..."

Orba turned around. Ineli turned her beaming countenance towards him whose face was as expressionless as that of a statue.

"Right, such things sometimes happen. As I intend to understand everything about you Brother, I feel at ease. Recently I also asked Fedom, whom Your Highness has become so close to, about various things. *Various things*." Ineli clapped her hands together. "Indeed, let us someday go and pray together that that person finds peace in the next world. We could exchange drinks together from the cup I was given. Won't you make time for Ineli?"

Without saying a word, Orba once again turned around and started walking away.

After watching that back for a short time, Ineli who had been stifling her amusement couldn't bear it anymore and burst into laughter, clutching her sides.

It's as I thought.

That person was not Gil Mephius. Considering that person's reaction, he probably wasn't the mastermind who had set himself up before the entire country. If, as Ineli supposed, Fedom was taking part in this, then it was a crime so great it could overturn the empire.

Ineli had no interest in things like who that person's real identity was, or where the real Gil Mephius was, or even whether or not his life was in danger.

Simply,

I can do what I want with this.

Her eyes gleamed at that single thought.

If Ineli were to expose the crime, she would naturally be a hero. She had however not the slightest intention of immediately broadcasting it to the emperor and his people. She wanted to enjoy for a while more her position of holding a secret that even his fiancée Vileena didn't know.

The toy she so badly wanted was within her reach and Ineli felt that she was now in a higher position than any of those around the prince.

Gil had reappeared after a week's interval, but he gave no answer to Gowen's messenger and said nothing about having kept the fortress waiting. That evening, having watched the airship training and given some advice, Vileena was going back along the way to her lodging. As she was going along, her expression changed.

Ah!

Gil was coming from the opposite direction.

Somehow or another she should call out to him, since she had been longing for the time when the prince would be able to move of his own accord. Unaware of her thoughts however, Gil passed straight by her, his eyes fixed ahead of him.

Vileena was indignant. She had wanted to ask him right away about what he would do regarding the reinforcements to Garbera. And also,

I'll go as reinforcement.

She just barely managed to prevent herself from saying that. The Vileena of old would undoubtedly have flown a ship to go rushing towards the reinforcements unit, even in the teeth of opposition from her surroundings. The princess of Garbera would also have asked about Mephius' real intentions in they impeding the reinforcements.

But since coming to Mephius, Vileena had learned a lot. She could no longer simple-mindedly believe that things would start moving if she rushed over. Was this what Theresia meant when she talked about becoming an adult? To no longer be able to do anything because of cold reality and an increasing number of masks? And, she realised, all human beings suffered from that interstice with reality.

In that case, the prince also...

Vileena turned her thoughts away from herself.

In the end, although they had been about to pass each other by without speaking,

"A little more."

Vileena stopped suddenly. A whisper in her ear, then Gil carried on walking.

"Please wait a little more."

Vileena Owell stood still for a long time, continuing to look in the direction he had taken even after he had disappeared from sight.

That evening, Apta Fortress was in uproar.

Gil Mephius had suddenly disappeared.

Part 2

Orba galloped across hills and valleys, man and horse cutting through the wind.

"Prince, where are we going? Prince!"

Also astride a horse, Bane was the only one to be following him.

Quite some time had passed since they had left Apta. Although Bane had several times called out to the prince as they dashed straight into the wind, not once had he turned around.

It had been completely unexpected. Bane had been enjoying himself at the banquet which was still being held every night on the pretext of being a victory celebration, when he was called to the stable by prince Gil Mephius.

"My prince. What is your command?"

"Come with me for a bit", the prince was already on his horse as he spoke, "I'll show you something good for you."

They had easily galloped out of Apta but as more than an hour had passed, Bane was having doubts. Having left Apta like that, where on earth was he planning on going? Besides there had also recently been bandit attacks along the roads to the citadel. No one knew where they would strike again. While on the one hand he was filled with anxiety and doubts, Bane didn't consider that the prince's eccentricity was strange. No matter how bizarre his behaviour might seem at first, it would surely pave the way to achieving results.

This – could he be meaning to set me up for some outstanding achievement?

Since the time they had been on the inspection tour of Apta, the prince had seen him in a different light. Bane couldn't help but hope that the prince was planning some grand strategy in which he himself would be given an important role to play.

Orba meanwhile continued to charge forward without saying a word. A thought flitted through his mind.

My home village?

Since coming to Apta, he had constantly been thinking of going to the place where his native village had been. For a start, it was doubtful whether the village even still existed but even so, he wanted to go. It was simply that that was the land where he, his brother Roan, Alice

and also his mother had lived together and he felt that he wanted to smell the nostalgic scent of the wind there.

It wasn't for such a sentimental reason that he now urged his horse to gallop like a gale however. If that had been his only reason, he naturally wouldn't have brought Bane along.

Eventually, they finally arrived at a place that he remembered. Having slowed his horse's steps for a moment, he dismounted at a spot that formed the entrance of a valley. A nearby riverbank stretched out from it and to Orba's left a river flowed. When the height was at its highest, he, his brother and Alice would walk the hour-long distance to go and bathe there. And on the way back, they would feel hot again so on the whole, they barely felt cool at all.

"Come down, Bane."

As the footholds had grown difficult, Orba and the other man led the horses. Carrying a lantern, they walked on. The surrounding area was so deathly quiet as to be eerie. Nervously following the prince, Gowen didn't notice at the time that several human shadows moved along the top of the cliff.

Before long, Orba came to a stop.

When he quickly raised the light anew, something like a fence could be seen at the end of the increasingly narrow path.

As I thought: somebody is here.

Although he tried to calm down, he couldn't help but be feel excited. Orba forcefully dragged his horse along at a half run. The fence that separated the outside world from the inside of the village didn't appear to be decayed. There were also the shadows of houses. The violent pounding of his heart beat loudly in his ears. Maybe someone he knew was there, no, maybe, possibly, even one of the people he had never stopped looking for might be living there like before...

"Prince, where are we?"

Ignoring Bane's question, Orba tied his horse to a slender tree growing near the fence and was about to rush to the other side. "Wait!" He heard a voice from behind him.

"Hii!" Bane screamed.

Several people stood in the dim circle of light cast by the lantern. All of them were armed with swords and guns, and the one at the front was pointing a pistol in their direction. There was no doubt that those figures belonged to the ones who had staged the surprise attack when they had been on the road to Apta.

"Oh ho!" The man spoke somewhat excitedly. "Amazing. This guy's the crown prince of Mephius!"

"What!?"

"Impossible" Another man lit a flaming torch and directed the light towards Orba. He was the one who had called out to the prince; he nodded, his eyes lit red from the fire. "You're right. I've definitely seen him. More than that, I even fired a gun at him."

There was a stir among the men. In their eyes, there appeared the conflicting lights of both hatred and delight, and all of their lips curled into a smile.

"I don't know on what whim it was but the prince really graced us with his presence of his own accord."

"Come, come. Don't be turning down our hospitality in this unworthy place."

Aiming their guns at him, the men moved towards him in a narrowing circle. Orba didn't make a single move.

"Let go, you curs!" Bane yelled, but with so many people within such a short distance, not matter how fiercely Orba fought to reach him, their chances of survival were slim. In the end, Orba had the sword and gun that were at his waist confiscated and, along with Bane, he was roughly shoved by the shoulder into the village grounds.

On the other side of the fence, he could vaguely make out huts in the twilight. There seemed to be about twenty of them. It looked like all the villagers had left and been replaced.

Orba was pushed into the village square in which a bonfire blazed. That this was the prince of Mephius was passed around, and the other side of the fire seemed to be seething with people. The atmosphere reeked of beasts and the air was filled with a murderous bloodlust.

"That's the crown prince of Mephius?"

"Kill him!"

"Let's string him up, here and now!"

"Burn him to death. Just like they did to our families!"

In the face of the fact that hands carrying axes and swords could reach at any moment from all directions to tear them to shreds, Bane wasn't even able to raise his voice and remained silent. Orba on the other hand was carefully watching them.

"Hmm, wait."

A well- built man took a step forward. The muscles on his bare arms were prominently on display. With a smirk on his unshaven face, he carried two swords in his hands. He flung one of them at Orba's feet.

"Beat, what are you thinking of doing?"

"Something this bastard loves. You've watched slaves kill each other, right? Well this is a rare chance for My Lord Prince to experience it for himself."

"Sounds good!"

"Show us, Oh Prince!"

The mingled voices of men and women rose in insistent ovation. While thrusting his sword at him, Beat began to circle around Orba. Every so often, he provocatively took a step forward then back again.

"Come on, take the sword, oh prince." Beat spat a glob of saliva. "Even if you stand there silently, this isn't the imperial court. No one will come and save you."

Orba unhurriedly bent down and picked up the sword. Standing in the centre of a storm of whistling, his eyes tracked Beat's movements.

Flames, the shadows of the crowd, Beat's smile. They spun around and around in turn into Orba's field of vision. Beat took a step forward and made a thrust. Pretending that he had failed to parry, Orba shook violently and staggered to the right.

His right shoulder felt heavy from where his collarbone had been shattered by Zaat's bullet. However receiving that blow made him realize that it had healed considerably.

"How skilful, Prince, how skilful!"

"Beat, don't kill him just yet."

"Let everyone have some fun!"

As though to say that he got it, Beat licked his lips. Swinging his sword with all his might and missing on purpose, he gradually cornered Orba who was dodging around excessively. Amidst the incessant laughter and cheering, Orba's back finally hit the wall of hut.

"There!"

Beat closed the distance between them in a blink, aiming to stab at Orba's shoulder.

"Ah!"

And yelped out almost immediately. His sword went whirling lightly upwards then fell to the ground and the tip of Orba's blade glittered just before Beat's eyes.

Without granting a single moment for surprise, it was Orba this time who offhandedly closed the distance between them and, pinning Beat's arms behind him, brought his sword against his neck.

"Like this?" The bandits had been rendered speechless and Orba gave them a scornful smile. "Useless guys who can't hold out should shut up. But sure, let's continue this game of make-believe. Or don't tell me that he's the strongest you've got?"

The prince's cold gaze and nerves of steel had even Bane staring in wide-eyed amazement, however,

"Bastard!"

"Don't be so full of yourself!"

"There aren't any vassals to change your nappies around here!"

As the people surged in a mass of hatred and were about to close in, Bane once again fell on his backside.

Swords, spears and the nozzles of several guns were aimed determinedly at Orba.

"Release Beat!"

"If you don't, then we'll kill you in the worst possible way!"

Still using Beat as a shield, Orba glared back at the pack of hate-filled eyes.

"Wait."

As a voice rose up, the wave of people was parted in two. A man walked down the centre of those who, left and right, had taken a step back. Sparks suddenly flew from the nearby bonfire.

As I thought, Orba reflected to himself.

"That was surprisingly good, Crown Prince of Mephius. If you're confident in your strength, compete with me. I'm the strongest one here."

No one made any objection and seeing how meekly they were all behaving, he was probably

the leader of the bandits.

However Orba knew that face that was lit by the fire's glow. Even though it had been more than six years, those sharp eyes, that characteristic aquiline nose - there was no mistaking them.

As the other drew near enough to make out Orba's face, he too looked faintly surprised.

They look alike - that was probably what he was thinking.

Without saying a word, Orba released Beat, lowered himself at the waist and braced himself anew.

"Ho. So that's your mood, is it?"

The bandit chief's lips twisted into a smile. However he didn't appear in the least bit mocking. He languidly dangled the tip of his sword, swaying it back and forth beneath Orba's eyes. Orba could tell that he was experienced. He was measuring the distance while pacing his breath, and Orba also readied his own breathing.

From across his raised sword, Orba glared at the chief, but...

With a *Hah*, he averted his gaze.

In the instant that he showed that he had lost in terms of willpower, the chief's blade suddenly drew near. It wasn't fancy. There were no feints either, what bore down was simply bloodlust and vigour. Two blows, three blows, were given without being thought out; from the first move, his sword cleaved wildly between life and death. In words, it was swordsmanship cultivated through actual combat.

Schling.

With a strangely clear sound, a sword was once again sent whirling into the heavens.

Orba held his right hand that had gone numb and crouched where he was.

"He did it!"

"Doug won. Did you see?"

"Seize them." Unlike his men, who were seething with excitement, the bandit chied Doug calmly gave his order, maintaining his position, the tip of his sword still in mid-air.

There was a stir among the delighted voices, and this time, from all four directions, the crowd advanced on and encircled both Orba and Bane.

At the same time.

The Imperial Guards were running around Apta Fortress, having received orders from Shique.

Orba isn't here.

The day was dying by the time Shique realised that. Orba had been there to see Esmena off, but after that he hadn't been seen again. Thinking that after all he was probably secluding himself in his chambers, Shique fortified his resolve to drag him this time and headed to the prince's private room. He couldn't bear to see Vileena's worried expression anymore.

That young lady has grown to be more adult-like.

Shique had that impression despite their still being little more than acquaintances. Maybe it could be said to be something distinctive to those destined to lead others. However it was a fact that while that young lady had from the start possessed boundless energy and ability to take action, her guts and strong willpower were being completely torn up at the roots.

Puberty.

Everyone goes through that period. A period in which they feel as though they were a different person from who they were just the day before. Relations with other people, with relatives and above all with oneself would change. This was surely what Vileena was currently experiencing. Moreover, she had married from the royal family of another country. There must be plenty of things for her to think about.

Therefore Shique had decided to rouse Orba by force if need be so that they could talk about the reinforcements to Garbera. He himself didn't understand why he was supporting princess Vileena to that extent. It might be that what was closest to Shique's current state of mind was that, as a misogynist, what he saw in Vileena were the capacities of a male lord, but he didn't think that that entirely explained it.

It's probably because I want to see it, he thought suddenly. To see the figures of Orba, a man who had risen from being a gladiator, and of Vileena, whose soul held the lustre of royalty, as they ran together through this worn-torn era. Shique believed that would make a very thrilling story.

Orba the Swordsman is mine to the last but I don't think I mind giving her Orba the Prince.

Still chuckling at his own thoughts, Shique arrived in front of the door to the chambers but, according to the guard protecting it,

"The prince left his room some time ago and hasn't returned."

With no other option, he looked for him all over the fort but didn't find him.

Strange...

Shique ordered the other Imperial Guards to also search throughout Apta. They did so stealthily so that far as possible, no one other than themselves would realise anything, however, when night fell several hours later, they had no choice but to give the alert.

Having conveyed the news to Oubary, they received help from the Black Armoured Division and extended their search to the streets of the castle town.

"Let's hope he hasn't been kidnapped", Oubary Bilan said, passing it off as a joke. "In Taúlia as well there must be people who don't look favourably upon the alliance with Mephius. If some troublemakers came over among Princess Esmena's guards, couldn't they have secretly stayed behind in the fortress and taken the prince away?"

Before long, they received accounts from fortress servants that "The prince left the castle on horseback along with Bane." Apparently they had spotted them by chance at the time.

It was already close to daybreak. That being the case, there was no choice but to organise a military troop to go and search outside Apta.

And at a time when the princess' homeland, Garbera, is in danger.

Having called a number of commanding officers to the headquarters on the barracks' ground floor, Shique was making preparations when he noticed the shadow of a young boy near one of the pillars. It was Dinn, the prince's attendant. He beckoned him over.

"Well! A secret assignation with such a young child? Your tastes have changed, huh, Vice-captain." Aeson of the Imperial Guards upbraided him critically.

"Don't be stupid."

Upon rushing towards Shique, Dinn timidly held out a letter. From that alone, he could hazard a guess.

"From the prince, hmm? What kind of plot am I going to find this time?" Without waiting for Dinn's reply, he opened the letter. As soon as he read it, Shique's expression changed. "Ah, what kind of idiocy is that prince up to now!"

Previously, Shique could truly have been said to never have batted an eyelid at anything that Orba might say or do, but this time he rushed out of the barracks in a panic.

"Hey, what about the meeting? Oubary will be here soon, you know."

"I'll leave the meeting to you, Aeson, since you’re the Assistant Vice-captain of the Imperial Guards."

"Since when?"

"I just appointed you."

He hurried away without looking back again. Shique being Shique, preparations other than those of looking for the prince were now necessary.

Part 3

Orba was shut up in what he judged to be a building's underground storehouse. His hands and feet had been bound and he was thrown down among the barrels and the broken farm tools that lay scattered all over the place. Bane appeared to have been taken somewhere else. Orba hoped he was still alive.

Bane was a member of the Black Armoured Division that had attacked the village. He believed that when he had been stationed at Apta, he had taken part in assaults and slaughter within the territories of Mephius. Therefore, if he were to receive retribution here, there was no need for Orba to feel sympathetic towards him. However, Orba currently had reasons for wanting him to stay alive if at all possible.

Not a single ray of light shone into the underground room. Nor did sounds reach it, so he was apt to lose his sense of time. But with senses somewhat like those of an animal's, Orba could vaguely guess that about three hours had passed since he was locked up.

He heard a sound coming from upstairs. Footsteps descended the staircase and with them, the light from a lantern fell on Orba's face.

The one carrying the light was the bandit chief who had fought with Orba. Two men armed with guns walked behind him. The chief's face was still young. Which wasn't surprising as there should only have been about a year's difference between him and Orba, making him seventeen, or perhaps eighteen, years old.

When the chief's eyes met Orba's, his lips curled into a dauntless smile.

"Ho, it looks like you're quietly behaving yourself without getting violent. Or have you realised it's useless and are begging for your life from the imperial family's guardian deity Mephius?"

"Doug, right?"

When Orba said his name from his prone position, the chief - Doug drew his eyebrows in a frown.

"Don't get too familiar, oh my prince. This isn't your country here. It's ours, you could say it was a kingdom just for us. We have our own laws here. In other words, here you aren't crown prince at all. You're just an intruder. And so..."

"What's so funny!" Barked one of the men in the rear as Orba once again flashed a fearless

grin.

"You say the same kind of things as in the old days, Doug. This village is my village, so you're the intruders, trampling about with your dirty feet, which is why me and my friends from the village would beat you up. You haven't changed a bit."

When he heard Orba's words, for a second, Doug swallowed his own words along with his saliva. As they watched the situation, the expressions on his subordinates' faces turned suspicious.

"You, what are you talking about?"

"Have you been taking Black Lily powder? For one thing, it's strange that you came this far from the fortress with just one companion."

"You still don't get it, Doug." Ignoring his subordinates, Orba looked only at Doug and continued talking. "No, you've probably realised, you just can't believe it. Well that's not surprising. You spent six years as you, but for six years, I had to constantly win my own life. And now if you notice, you're a bandit chief and I'm in this position. Of course, six years ago, neither of us could have imagined something like this would happen."

"Six years..."

Doug's leader-like attitude crumbled and his expression reflected only confusion. Like that, his face looked like that of a boy his age. The other men however sneered.

"He's talking gibberish."

"If it's not drugs then he's gone mad from fear. Hey Doug, if we cut off one of his fingers, even he'll stop blabbing on. Then we can send that finger to Solon, as a threat to the emperor."

But because of Orba's attitude, Doug was focussing all of his attention on his face, and didn't appear to hear the noise from his surroundings. Waiting for the just moment when he was about to say something. Orba quickly moved in for the kill.

"Roan..."

"What?"

"Roan died at Apta."

Doug immediately looked daunted. Orba continued to fix him with his calm gaze.

"That's why I came here. Doug, I won't tell you to untie me right now but won't you spare me a little time?"

"Bastard."

Losing patience with the prince who didn't show the slightest hint of begging for his life, the two men's hands sidled up to their guns.

"Leave me to speak alone with him."

When Doug spoke in a hoarse voice, they both opened their eyes wide.

"What are you saying!"

"Guys from the Imperial Court are smooth-tongued. You're being fooled by his gibberish bullshit..."

"It's fine, so go!" Even as Doug was shouting, his narrowed eyes stayed on Orba's face the entire time. "Ten minutes, no, five minutes will be enough. If it turns out he's just talking bullshit, forget a finger, I'll cut off his arm and even have him kneel before us."

Compelled by their young and now pale-faced chief's authority, the men obeyed while grumbling complaints.

The one with whom Orba had never stopped quarrelling with during their childhood. There had of course been many reasons for them ending up in fistfights. Because he had made a fool of him, because he had insulted his family, because he had deliberately collided with him, because he had seemed about to cover Alice in flour...

What he hadn't thought of at the time however was that most of those reasons were Orba's own. His blood had always been thrumming darkly. As it coursed through his body, he would look for any opportunity to vent.

"He fights dirty!" One sturdy boy had complained about him when he was just over three years old. "He never admits his defeat, and he bites and scratches. And in the end after it's over, he'll ambush you saying 'It's not over yet'. He isn't strong, he's just persistent."

By the time Orba was almost ten, no matter how much older the other children were, when there was trouble related to him, they wouldn't get involved. And so Orba also lost interest. Instead, his partner in brawls became Doug from the neighbouring village.

Doug was a boy with a disposition similar to Orba's. When the neighbouring villages held joint festivals, groups of boys of about the same age would get together and look for fights. The first time he and Orba got into a scuffle was also on the night of a festival.

He and Alice had gone to a neighbouring village and when, in front of a street stall there, Doug had asked Alice to dance, Orba had been the one to refuse.

"This isn't a girl you can touch with your filthy hands. Don't come any closer, you stink."

From Orba's caustic words, it was easy to assume that he was picking a fight. They immediately fell to grappling, swinging their fists and kicking at each other. Brawls between over-excited youths were a staple at festivals. Far from stopping them, the adults spurred them on with their cheering. In terms of physique, the one-year-older Doug had the advantage but when Orba fell to the ground, he picked up a small rock and held it in his fist. With his strikes now packing more punch, he caught Doug on the tip of the nose and from then on things went at Orba's pace.

At that point, a boy who was one of Doug's underlings, seeing his leader at a disadvantage, tried to take Alice hostage. Orba but also Doug, who despised that kind of method, rose together to put a stop to it. However, the boy who was pinioning Alice's arms had his foot sharply stamped on and she caught his cheeks in a slap as his face jerked upwards.

"Right, this fight is over."

As Orba and Doug stood stupefied, Alice stepped between them, grabbed Orba by the ears, and forcibly dragged him away.

That was the first time the two of them got into a fight. After that, they clashed a number of times and no doubt each thought they hated the other. But that relationship of theirs was also shattered six years ago.

When Garbera's army seized Apta, the area where Orba and the others had lived passed under a different ruler. And so, troops from their previous sovereign country of Mephius burned the villages to the ground.

Once the two were alone, Doug pulled a handgun from his waist. With a quick movement, he aimed it at Orba's head.

"Understand? I'll shoot you without mercy if you keep talking nonsense." He threatened in a low voice. "Just who the hell are you!?"

"Orba."

"Bullshit."

Although he himself had increased the space between them, when he heard Orba's answer, he immediately rejected it and approached him roughly. He pressed the muzzle of his gun

directly to Orba's forehead.

"What kind of bullshit is that? How would Orba come back to Apta as the crown prince? Why would he come back to this village with a Mephian soldier? Answer me!"

"My village was burnt down by Mephian troops." Paying absolutely no mind to the gun muzzle, Orba simply continued talking while looking straight into Doug's eyes. "I barely survived, and that was only on the whim of a certain Mephian aristocrat who suspected that I could be of use."

"Of use?"

"My face looks like that of Mephius' crown prince."

"..."

"I was trained to be the prince's body double. But it's a plot that's only known to one of Mephius' nobles, neither the other aristocrats nor the imperial family know about it. The other Mephians at Apta should also believe that I'm the real prince. And so, on the prince's authority, I went to war with Taúlia."

"B-Bullshit!"

Doug shook his head, his face pallid, but Orba continued with his tale regardless.

"Coming here was a good opportunity. I wanted to go back once to my native village, but I really didn't expect to be attacked by people from the same area. Still, your defences are pretty poor. Just by talking a bit with enough people, both the bandits' hideout and their leader's name came to light. When I heard the name 'Doug', I was able to imagine quite a few things. Just as I've lived these past six years covered in disgrace, you've had your own six years. And so I came to check it out for myself."

"I don't believe it." Doug groaned, looking like he was grinding his teeth. "B-But at the same time, I can't believe that the crown prince would know Roan's name. Are you really Orba? It's true there's a likeness but, even if it's been six years, that face..."

"I told you I was trained to be this country's crown prince. That involved various methods."

Doug stood frozen in the same posture for a long time. Then, he took a deep breath.

"You said that Roan is dead?"

"Yeah."

"Then, what about the others?"

"You should know that better than me, right? Keefa, Lulu, Bione, what happened to them?" Orba enumerated the names of the villagers.

Doug would probably have gathered together the villagers who had survived Garbera's looting and Oubary's setting fire to the villages. That being the case, maybe there were some of Orba's acquaintances other than Doug here and he simply hadn't recognised them earlier because of the darkness. As Orba imagined it, they were alive and had taken to banditry in order to take revenge on Mephius. That would be why they mainly attacked caravans from Mephius.

"There are a lot of people whose fate I don't know." As Orba had expected, once he gave the names of the villagers, Doug's eyes glinted sharply and he lowered the gun. Then his eyes wandered, seemingly at a loss. ".... A-Alice, she, what happened to her?" Doug asked, speaking in a rush.

There was no way for Doug to realise. To realise that although Orba had believed that he no longer held out any hope, when Doug fired off that question, the little that had in truth remained in his heart was crushed and scattered forever.

I see.

Orba closed his eyes for a single moment. And he swore to himself that he would lock away all of his hopes and feelings into that one moment.

I see. Somewhere, I still believed. Foolishly. Pathetically.

As Orba remained silent, Doug, his emotions bursting out, shouted,

"Oi, what's wrong? Don't tell me you don't know if Alice..."

"Did you think she was still alive?"

"W-What?"

"I did too, but if you don't know anything about her either, then – then she's probably no longer living. Just like my brother. I'm such a fool, simply believing that they were still alive even though there was no evidence. There's nothing left to do except give up."

The two of them fell silent. Although united in that silence by the same pain, neither looked at the other.

"... *Orba*."

After a while, Doug called out his name for the first time.

"Yeah."

"You said you became the crown prince's body double. Where's the real one? If he's in Apta, couldn't you bring him here?"

"If I brought him here, what would you do?" Unintentionally, Orba almost laughed wryly. "Are you thinking that you've wasted your time since I'm an impostor? You're being stupid."

"What do you mean?"

"In the first place, capturing the crown prince was only creating a burden for yourselves. What were you going to do with me when you believed I was the prince? Kill me?"

"N-No. Take you hostage..."

"Take me hostage, and then what? What would you have gained from it? Furthermore, who would you have negotiated with? Mephius itself? Your opponent is far too big, you'd have been crushed in the blink of an eye. And of course to kill you all, Mephius would only need to set fire to the villages claiming it was in retaliation. Because of you, any number of the just-rebuilt villages would disappear into ash all over again. Besides, I doubt that loosing Prince Gil would cause Mephius the slightest harm as things are now. Even if you were planning to take revenge, it would have been completely pointless."

"... You..."

Although it was different from earlier when he had doubted Orba's real identity, Doug looked at him as though he were seeing a different person. Engrossed in what he was saying, Orba however didn't notice.

"Doug. More importantly, Oubary is at Apta."

"What?"

"Oubary of the Black Armoured Division. When our villages were burned down, he was the ringleader."

After dawn, Doug gathered the main members of the gang in the village's meeting hall. Originally they had been farmers, people who made a living by catching fish in the rivers, blacksmiths and so on, but for the past six years, they had had been attacking caravans of Mephian merchants and distributing their spoils among the villages. They had exchanged gunfire and crossed swords with hired mercenary escorts more than just once or twice.

Several of them had suffered indelible wounds to their face or body, and not only their appearance but everything in their demeanour exuded unmistakable menace.

All of them were older than Doug, but no one had objected to making the eighteen-year-old their leader. He was quick-witted, knowledgeable about geography and above all, he received overwhelming support from the hot-blooded youths. They who never knew what the next day might hold preferred to follow the safest methods, so none of them were angry at following a boy.

"What did you say!?"

But although they had so far held their nerve, when they heard that Oubary was at Apta, their expressions changed. All at once, a thirst for blood broke free.

"Damn it! How dare he come back to Apta?"

"With the right information, we could have ambushed him..."

"No, it's not too late even now. We'll lure him out with the prince as hostage. We can threaten to kill the prince if he doesn't come..."

A great many of them were galvanised into furious speech. Doug however rejected their suggestions.

"An admirable stratagem but have you thought about how villages within Mephian territory will be burned down?"

"Then what do you want to do with that prince? You can't be thinking of sending him back unharmed?"

"Since killing or threatening the prince are both pointless, we'll use a different way to lure him out."

"A different way?"

"Yeah." His expression sharp, Doug looked at each face in turn. "If this plan works then it won't just be Oubary; the Black Armoured Division that murdered our families, we'll be able to throw most of them to the flames."

As Doug unfolded his plan, they listened first dumbfounded and stunned, then leaning forward in excitement. When he had finished talking, Doug once more looked at each member's face and said,

"If a single one of those predictions is wrong, the whole plan will be ruined. Even so, I'm

thinking of going for it because we'll never get this chance again if we let it slip by us. What do you say, shall we do it?"

One by one, the main members of the gang of bandits nodded, their eyes ablaze.

"Whatever road we choose, now that Apta has gone back to being Mephian territory, I didn't think we'll be able to continue long as bandits."

"One way or another, we'll get the women and children to escape to the villages around Birac. We can give them all the money we have to hand."

"Ah, it will be a pleasure. The only question is, who's going to get to kill Oubary. And don't all of you say that you want to do it yourselves!"

Doug unintentionally smiled at that hasty remark.

"That's absolutely out of the question." He announced gravely.

"Understood. You're saying that you want to do it yourself?"

"Right, you lost your parents, your grandparents and your younger brother, so..."

"No, it won't be me." Doug said clearly and pointed to the entrance at the back of the meeting hall. As they saw the figure walking through it, the men's voices rose in a 'Ah!'.

"The one who will kill Oubary," Doug continued to look grave, "is *him*".

Chapter 5: The Flames of Demise

Part 1

"Vileena-sama, Vileena-sama!"

Theresia called out loudly. Although her mistress often disappeared from sight, the situation was as it was. The princess had been informed of the prince's disappearance. Official notice had not yet been given to the town, but as a large number of soldiers from Apta were performing searches, it was only a matter of time before the populace would find out. And of course, if they raised a fuss, the entire country would also learn about it.

Not to mention that if the prince were to safely be found at some point, naturally his situation would once again take a turn for the worse. Thinking that it was by no means impossible that in order to avoid that, the princess might follow after the prince and go out of Apta, even Theresia went pale.

However,

"Vileena-sama."

She almost sank down unintentionally. It was somewhat anticlimactic.

Vileena was wandering aimlessly around the military training range within the fortress. As to what she was doing, she was gazing up at every tree, peering in the shade of the stacked up piles of armour, walking to the stable to compare the horses one by one, and appeared for all the world as though she were looking for something that she had lost.

"You surely can't be thinking that the prince will be in this kind of place. This isn't a game of hide-and-seek."

Against her better judgement, her tone was somewhat biting.

"I don't know," Vileena answered without so much as turning towards Theresia. "With that prince, it isn't impossible that he could have dug a hidey-hole. As an experiment, we could try digging where you're standing, Theresia. You never know, he might appear saying 'Boo!'"

Aha! Theresia homed in on Vileena's detached tone of voice. She was angry. And it was no ordinary anger either. Occasionally when her anger got to her head, her mistress would do things that she herself didn't understand.

Back then, had it been when she was seven or eight years old? Her older sister, Princess Luhla had wanted a puppy that had been sold at a street stall during a festival, and so she had begun to keep it in a corner of the inner palace. Vileena also expressed an interest. However, he dog was scared of her and wouldn't go near her, whose training methods were so strict despite her youth that she was almost like a tyrant.

"I've never heard of a dog that won't let humans hold it. It must be a cat. When people aren't looking, I'm sure it goes 'meow'".

Thus angered, Vileena had taken to watching the dog in the dead of night from near where it slept. Although very young, Vileena of course didn't really believe such a thing. As it was something she had said herself, she couldn't stand down - was an explanation that was also incorrect. Being excessively strong-willed, she would persevere even if brought her no personal satisfaction.

"Won't you come out, Prince? After all, I'm in plain sight."

She called out, looking as she had when dealing with a dog that might have been a cat. At the same time, having thought about wandering around the training grounds, she walked instead towards the garden. Just as Theresia had surmised, Vileena Owell was angry.

That, that sly, scheming, pretentious, jokster of a princeling!

Getting more and more wound up in her irritation, she unthinkingly stamped her foot.

When she was told that the prince appeared to have left Apta taking Bane with him, Vileena's first thought was **Again?** Yesterday, as they had passed each other, prince Gil had said "Please wait a little more." And so she believed that this time too he had some kind of purpose in mind. There surely couldn't be any need to mobilise the soldiers at Apta in a search, since after all the outcome could only be such as to leave everyone amazed.

And yet, in spite of that - or rather because of that, Vileena felt resentful.

Again, again you didn't confide in me.

This was the prince who had revealed all his plans at the time of the war with Taúlia. Vileena had thought that she had come a step closer to his innermost thoughts, so she found it hard to forgive that this time he had once again acted secretively and kept his mouth firmly shut.

At the time of the war with Taúlia, I thought I could place at least a little faith in him. No

matter how strange his behaviour might seem on the outside, I was going to stop scolding him, getting angry at him and saying childish things.

Having faith in him was surely important. However Vileena was finding that not being able to do anything but wait was making her thoroughly irritated.

This isn't like me. If the prince decides to seclude himself indoors again, I might need to attack more forcefully.

Vileena was growing enthusiastic about the idea that there were different ways of believing in people. Since waiting silently went against her nature, she should support, if necessary forcibly, the prince who moved at his own accord.

At that moment, the horses in the stable suddenly grew restless. Instead of drawing near the fence, they were hurriedly shying away from it.

"P-Princess!" Theresia let out a small scream.

As Vileena watched a medium-sized Baian dragon came lumbering near. It wore neither chains nor reins. As the not-unnaturally astonished Vileena was unconsciously about to jump out of the way, from the other side of it, Hou Ran's figure, sitting astride a small-sized Tengo, came into view.

She wondered whether she was chasing after an escaped dragon, but Ran didn't appear to be in a hurry. She seemed instead to be slowing down the Tengo in order to let the Baian take the lead. Forgetting her fear, Vileena drew her eyebrows together slightly; the training and exercise ground for the dragons was in the opposite direction.

"Ran!"

"The princess?"

Ran brought the Tengo to a standstill. The Baian turned its head in her direction and, understanding that she wasn't moving on, also stopped. Theresia appeared to have lost her ability to speak and could only wave her hands at the princess as though to tell her to run away.

"Where are you bound?"

To Vileena's question, Ran answered as though it were perfectly obvious,

"To where... the prince is."

Vileena couldn't understand why Ran had faltered before saying 'prince'. Or rather, she didn't

realise that she had.

"Did he inform you before leaving?"

"No", the girl from the borderlands had eyes reminiscent of a deep lake and in those eyes, Vileena's figure was reflected. "It's simply that that child knows. Once its heart has connected with a human, it can feel them no matter how far apart they are. It's what humans call being guided by ether."

'That child' no doubt referred to the Baian that was standing quietly a little in front of her.

"I've never heard anyone say something like that before."

"Is that so?"

Ran didn't seem inclined to argue. Nonetheless, Vileena judged her to be extremely knowledgeable when it came to dragons.

Come to think of it...

The ancient Magic King Zodias was said to have discovered the existence of ether as well as the means for manipulating it from the ruins of the Dragon Gods. Zodias had later expressed his belief that the Dragon Gods had once freely manipulated ether and that they had built a great civilisation on this planet.

In Garbera, those kinds of legends were given little credence. They even doubted that Zodias had actually existed. But since having been sent to Mephius, Vileena had remembered the theory that modern-day dragons were the degenerated form of the ancient Dragon Gods.

"So then, if you follow that child, you will find out where the prince is?"

"If it's nearby."

"But... why do you need to go to the prince now? Weren't you the one who said to leave that person be?"

"I don't remember saying any such thing. Personally, I can't bear for that child to feel lonely. So I'm going."

"That child..."

Vileena carefully scrutinised the Baian's face. Its forked tongue was flicking in and out of its mouth. Occasionally when it opened its mouth, tusks as sharp as blades would peek out.

Within her chest, Vileena's feelings were stirring noisily. She herself didn't understand what

was going on. And while she didn't understand, it was with a feeling of desperate hurry that she spoke,

"Is it *only* that child?"

"What do you mean?"

"What I'm asking is if it is only that child who is feeling lonely and who is worried about the prince."

"I don't need to tell Vileena."

"Vileena." While repeating her own name, Garbera's third princess let out a chuckle. From 'she' to 'Vileena'. It probably marked an elevation in status.

"I see. You are as difficult as a dragon. Well, I probably am too. I was only looking for a pretext to convince myself."

"....?"

Atop of her saddle, a slightly troubled Hou Ran frowned. Without realising that that kind of behaviour was unusual for her, Vileena said,

"Very well. In that case, I will go too."

"P-Princess!" Theresia exclaimed, horrified.

"I need to get ready. I will be done at once, so could you please wait."

"The limit is how long that child can wait. I won't wait beyond that."

"You make things clear. Understood, I will hurry."

"Princess, you cannot!"

While once again playing tag with Theresia, Vileena felt her body grow light.

Elsewhere.

Although the prince's whereabouts were unknown, Oubary Bilan didn't much feel like joining the search.

"That prince delights in entertaining us with his bizarre behaviour."

Having said that, and after sending soldiers to search in all directions by way of an excuse, the man himself went back to drinking and to going out hunting in the forest.

He was not in the least bit concerned about where the prince may have gone, but since Oubary was at Apta, the imperial family might hold him responsible for the disappearance, and thus he couldn't simply leave things be.

How troublesome, such were his real thoughts.

However he remembered somewhat uneasily that his own subordinate, Bane, was rumoured to have gone with the prince. When he had asked around, he was told that he had been on surprisingly close terms with the prince at Apta.

That bastard. Just because the prince is highly praised doesn't mean he should change his allegiance.

Remembering the captain's puffed-up face, Oubary, who had gone out hunting, tossed back a large mouthful of wine from his flask. Hunting gun in hand, he took aim at a wild boar that had was cornered nearby. He felt like that splendid kill completely refreshed his spirits.

He couldn't stand Bane's personality and if the prince particularly wanted that man as his subordinate, it would be no great loss for the Black Armoured Division. Or rather, if that man would do for the prince, Oubary would give him over immediately.

He's a poor judge of character, Oubary sneered as he walked towards his next prey.

That evening, just as he arrived back at the fortress, a soldier knelt before him. Upon enquiring, he learned that Bane had returned.

"Why hasn't he come here in person?"

Oubary's angry words were accompanied by the stench of liquor on his breath.

"Yes. That is, the captain can't move but there is something he wishes to tell the general no matter what and..."

He explained that Bane was waiting for the general at a shop in the fortress' town. Moreover, he did not want his return to be publicly known and the soldier appeared to have more to convey.

"What's going on?"

Oubary glared at the soldier with eyes clouded from drinking, but when Bane's message was whispered in his ear, his opened wider and wider as he stared at the man. "What! Is this

true?"

"Yes, it's what captain Bane said..."

All at once, the liquor-induced colour faded from Oubary's face and, taking a number of attendants with him, he descended to the town.

Bane was waiting for him at a cheap ale-house that stood away from the town's hustle and bustle. Not touching a drop of drink, he sat in a corner seat, quivering. When he saw Oubary's figure, he shot upright, forcefully kicking his chair back in the process.

"Gen-General!"

"Is what you said true?"

Oubary cut in without any form of notice. Bane nodded earnestly.

According to what Oubary had heard, Bane and the prince had been captured by bandits while out on a long ride. Bane was separated from the prince and imprisoned in an underground. dungeon but, through a gap in the thieves' vigilance, the prince had hurried to him and untied his ropes.

"There's no guard on watch right now. If we're going to escape, now is the time to do it." The prince had said to Bane. It seemed however that they wouldn't be able to escape together. "I'll deliberately make it look like I'm escaping in a different direction. I'll be more likely to attract their attention. I'll buy time as a decoy, whatever happens go and inform the general. Right, be sure to let general Oubary know by the end of the day."

Sent off by the prince, Bane had jumped onto a horse tied to a tree and had galloped back to Apta.

Oubary pondered. Most of the prince's imperial troops having been sent to Garbera as reinforcements, Apta's current military strength was no more than the five hundred from the Black Armoured Division. No doubt that was why the prince had said to inform him specifically.

"Should we inform the Imperial Guards?" Asked one of his attendants.

"No", Oubary answered however, running his tongue over his lips. "The prince's life is at stake. Not only is there not a moment to lose, but if soldiers charged out of Apta in large numbers, those bastards would probably realise it and escape. I'll go with a hundred and fifty from the Black Armoured Division. Sarne."

"Yes."

Oubary entrusted the task of choosing the hundred and fifty soldiers to his adjutant, Sarne. After that, while making sure that the soldiers were hurrying about, the general of the Black Armoured Division's face seemed to be wreathed in smiles.

That the princeling was stupid enough to go out for fun and to get caught by bandits means that this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me to pull off a great feat. Even such foolishness can sometimes have its uses.

To save the life of royalty, and moreover of the heir to the throne, would be an achievement that would more than wipe out his disgrace in Solon. It was an added bonus that the one whose gratitude he would earn for having himself saved him from assassination was the prince who had appointed slaves as his Imperial Guards. He would surely return the favour done him by Oubary Bilan, no matter how extravagant the reward,

"I'm getting tired of hunting beasts. Slaves would be next after beasts, and treating myself to some bandits might not be bad either."

Best of all was the feeling of his blood boiling. For Oubary, life was meaningless without fighting.

Part 2

Guided by Bane, Oubary Bilan and the hundred and fifty from the Black Armoured Division drew near the bandits' hideout just before daylight faded.

Naturally they lit neither fire nor lamps. As they marched, they were careful to make as little noise as possible. There was only the snorting and clip-clopping footsteps of the horses, as well as the clanging of armour and helmets, as they slowly weaved their way through the trees. A while ago, several people had been sent out on reconnaissance. Lights shone from every house in the village and a number of men and women seemed to be drinking and dancing. There were people who appeared to be lookouts carrying guns but by going along the old beaten track that was the route chosen for their march, they should avoid running into them.

Stylishly dressed in dignified light armour, as he jolted along atop of his horse, Oubary's eyes shone with excitement as they drew nearer to battle and to its reward.

They started down a narrow path hedged in by cliffs. On Oubary's instructions, they all dismounted. With Bane as their guide, they advanced inwards while hiding themselves behind trees. Oubary beckoned them then gave the command to draw their swords.

"Right, go."

When soldiers had destroyed the fence with mallets, the gun corps, lined up side-by-side, opened fire all at once. The plan was to lure the villagers and to seize the advantage through further gunfire and arrows. Some of the soldiers had been sent on a roundabout route, taking a mountain trail that led behind the village; when they judged the timing to be right, the arrangement was for both sides to attack at the same time. However,

"Wait!"

Oubary temporarily halted the shooting. There was absolutely no reaction from within the village.

Don't tell me they were able to flee.

Oubary bit the edge of his thin lips. They must have abandoned their hideout when they noticed that Bane had disappeared. And yet, a little while earlier when they had sent out scouts, they had seen the shapes of people. That being the case, there hadn't been enough time for them to escape. Or it was also possible that they had gotten rid of the prince who had become nothing but a burden.

"Search every house. Don't miss even a single one."

Oubary ordered as he crossed through the wrecked fence. As each lit flames for their torches, the area was illuminated by the hazy light of fire. There were a number of the sod-thatched huts standing in rows. The vestiges of evening meals still wafted from smoke-filled pits. There were also traces of open-air fires here and there, which clearly hinted at there having been people there until just a while ago.

Oubary considered the situation while soldiers investigated the environs, when:

"General!"

A soldier called out loudly. His face was flushed with excitement.

"We found the prince!"

"What?"

Oubary's face brightened with greedy delight. It was a shame that he hadn't gotten to fight but at least he would have achieved his outstanding feat.

Near a vacant plot of land with a well, there was a building that looked as though it could house several tens of people. It was probably used to hold gatherings.

Accompanied by soldiers to his right and to his left, Oubary entered the building. "Oh ho", he narrowed his eyes.

Deep inside the wide hall, there was definitely the shape of a person. He seemed to be tied to a chair. His head was drooping as though he were asleep.

"Prince, Prince Gil!"

Oubary took a torch and strode towards the figure, raising it as he went.

The person who was tied up slowly lifted his head. The light from the flames fell upon his face and there was no mistaking it. It was Gil Mephius.

"It's very quiet."

Urging her horse to advance, Vileena spoke as she considered their surroundings. Low cliffs rose on either side of them.

At the front was the Baian and behind it Hou Ran rode on the Tengo. All around them, it had grown completely dark. As the Baian that was in the lead sometimes stopped as though

sniffing a scent to find a way, their progress was slow.

"Are you afraid?"

"Certainly not."

Vileena said, as though telling Ran not to underestimate her. Ran smiled faintly.

"It's quiet but there are signs of life. This child seems to getting wind of a rather large number of smells."

"When did you talk with it?"

"Constantly."

Even though Ran's answer was clear, the meaning was still unintelligible. Somehow or another, Vileena was able to grasp her personality and they had simply reached an understanding without needing to talk.

The road the two of them were following was exactly the same as the one Orba had brought Bane along the previous evening. About an hour earlier, they had stopped to let the dragons and the horse have a drink at the riverside. Although she had spoken in that way for Ran's benefit, Vileena felt vaguely uneasy about the stillness and darkness of their surroundings. However, she silently followed Ran, who was being led by the Baian, without revealing those feelings.

When, carried by the wind, something sounded faintly in Vileena's ears. The sound of a great many people firing guns. The two of them looked at each other and slowed their steeds.

"That was..."

Vileena had immediately halted her horse and signalled to Ran to stop as well. There were a number of armed soldiers along the winding road ahead. Their backs were turned towards them and their attention seemed to be focused on something further down the path.

The flames from the torches they held illuminated their Black Armoureds and armour, and Vileena realised that they were Oubary Bilan's Black Armoured Division.

"Have they also located him?"

"Wait."

This time it was Ran who stopped the mounts. The Baian that the two had at some point overtaken also stopped when she turned around. Or rather, although it appeared to want to go forward, it pawed at the air with its foreleg without ever advancing. It was behaving as

though facing something it absolutely loathed.

"What is the matter?"

"It seems to smell something it hates. There's no doubt that the prince is down there but its instincts are preventing it from doing what it wants. A dragon's instinct isn't only something that is ingrained through experience. Among them and throughout the generations, ether endows them with something like precognition."

"Precog..." Vileena considered for a short while, then, "It can't be... Something along the lines of someone having set a trap to capture the prince?"

"It might be. This child is particularly sharp for that sort of thing. - Wait, where are you going?"

"I am going to inform Oubary. Please stay here."

It was no sooner said than done, and Vileena had already spurred her horse on with a kick to its flank. "Princess!?" Ran heard the soldiers exclaim in astonishment. Ran was about to follow after the princess when the Tengo stood bolt upright, forcing her to a sudden stop.

Behind her, the Baian turned around. Ran pursed her lips; there were signs that a large number of people were approaching from that direction.

"Oubary?" Gil spoke in a raspy voice. "Thankfully you came. Bane seems to have done his job."

"Your safety is more important than anything, Your Highness. Nevertheless, to be outdone by the likes of those bandits is unlike Mephius' heroic and celebrated prince."

Oubary had long hated the prince. Being thus in a position to look down on him, the general smiled mockingly. Tied to the chair, Gil said weakly,

"I'm sorry. ... However, it seems they weren't originally that kind of group. They said that their village was burned down and they were reduced to banditry out of necessity."

"That would be at the time when Apta was occupied by those savages from Garbera. Although it may be that your kind heart holds some sympathy for them, I have no interest in the circumstances surrounding bandits. Now then, which way did they flee? Not a single one of their necks will be sparred, those curs who kidnapped the Crown Prince of our revered imperial dynasty."

"It was not Garbera that burned down the village." Gil Mephius raised heavy-looking eyelids

and stared Oubary in the eyes. "I heard all about it, Oubary. What happened in this village was entirely your doing."

"No, that - What are you talking about?"

For an instant, Oubary could be seen to back away but, in the end, he had nerve. He was confident that here and now, he could certainly overwhelm the prince.

"The one who set fire to this village, no, to all the villages in this entire area was you, Oubary."

"...."

The subordinates that were behind Oubary looked at each other. They remembered what they had done. As they were turning pale, Oubary silently ordered them out with a wave of his hand.

"Why did you do something like that? It goes without saying that they were people of Mephius. You who are part of Mephius' military, why did you..."

"Deplorable."

"What?"

"It is deplorable, Your Highness. Could it be, Your Highness, that you believe what can only be called nonsense spouted by the likes of bandits more than you believe in a commander who has faithfully served the imperial family? I, Oubary Bilan, swear by the Dragon God Mephius that I have never done such a thing."

"..."

"And, even if... ah, this is speaking hypothetically. Even if I had done so..."

Feeling increasingly superior towards the prince who was remaining silent, Oubary grew greedy. This princeling was oblivious to the ways of the world. Oubary felt like explaining what he had done – and of course he remembered personally setting fire to the area's villages – then using that to tear through the prince’s utter ignorance so that he could look down on him more and more.

"Say it wasn't me but some other commander who was stationed at Apta at the time and who had done that same thing, I wouldn't consider it a crime in the slightest."

"Why is that?" Gil asked, his entire countenance expressing bewilderment. "What kind of reason could there be for needing to burn down the people's villages?"

"Forgive me if I appear to be speaking above my position, but as unworthy as I, Oubary, am, if nothing else, I have more experience than Your Highness and that is simply another facet of war."

"..."

"Your Highness is still young. And until now, you have always gained victory through heroic actions. However various things can happen in war and the outcome of a battle is not always clear-cut. I was indeed unable to protect Apta from Garbera. Nor did I receive sufficient aid from my country. However if I had merely fled and thus allowed Garbera to grow over-confident, then it would also have occupied the villages in the surrounding area and, as a result, it would have been easy for it to march towards our country's centre."

At the same time.

I see.

Tied to the chair, Gil Mephius – which is to say, Orba – felt that the time he had eagerly been waiting for had finally arrived.

There was no hesitating. He had already steeled his resolve. Because he would not come by a second chance to snatch away his mortal enemy's life without letting go of his mask, Orba would not falter.

However, at the very end, Orba desperately wanted to hear from Oubary about setting the village on fire. If you were to ask him why, Orba himself still didn't clearly understand the reason. He harboured a seething hatred towards the man and even though he would not simply attack him from behind, nor simply take his life, Orba had decided that when the time came, he would point his blade towards Oubary.

If I don't, six years of stored up hatred would be completely wasted.

He was possessed by the gruesome demon of revenge.

"In this thing we call war, in one way or another, there will always be a price to pay in victims and sacrifices to be made."

Oubary triumphantly carried on talking. Naturally he was unware that 'Gil Mephius' had a sword grasped in his hands that were tied behind his back, just as he was unware that 'Gil Mephius' could free himself in an instant of the ropes that bound him.

"In order to protect the people from an even greater sacrifice and to reap benefits for the country, one needs the resolve to be able to throw everything to the flames."

"I understand."

Orba's face was positively radiant as he spoke. Truthfully, his heart and mind were perfectly clear.

And with it, he was overflowing with willpower and energy.

"Oubary, it is thanks to the veterans of a thousand battles such as yourself that Mephius can know peace. That you also saved my life is something I will be sure to explain to Father. Now then, come and untie these ropes."

"Yes, certainly."

Having heard what he wanted, Oubary was beaming with joy. He walked up to Orba and was about to lean down closer.

He's here.

Orba grasped the sword ever more tightly. He found that the muscles in his shoulders and back were so strained they were rigid. When Oubary was so close that he could almost feel his body heat, Orba would knock back his chair with a kick and leap up.

Then, without pausing for breath, he would swing to hit Oubary who would go down without being able to utter a sound.

"Prince, are you there?"

He heard that voice from outside.

Vileena!

Startled, Orba stopped halfway as he was moving his waist. Oubary had been about to lean over him but seeing the rope drop loose from the prince's torso by itself, he too stopped.

And in his surprise, Orba, who had put too much strength in his movement, dropped his sword.

The sound of the blade hitting the floor with a crash resounded uncannily loud.

Part 3

When princess Vileena had suddenly rushed up on horseback, the soldiers of the Black Armoured Division were dumbfounded.

"Where is the general?"

Still on horseback when she asked that question, she then went up to the village meeting hall under the soldiers' guidance. They had told her that the prince had been discovered there after he had been captured by bandits. A feeling of relief spread through her chest but as she recalled Ran's prophetic words, a twinge of anxiety still remained.

And so,

"Prince, are you there?"

She called out as she was about to step into the hall. Upon which, confusion broke out inside. A metallic sound struck Vileena's ears.

At the same time.

A group of torch-carrying soldiers entered one of the buildings. The prince had already been found but there was no saying that there might not be some valuables to look for.

Suddenly, the one in the lead was knocked off his feet and went flying to the right as though hit from the side by an invisible fist.

Immediately following was the sound of uninterrupted gunshots. They tore through the cheeks of the one now standing first and the force of the impact broke his neck, killing him outright. Then the second, the third; their corpses fell, piled on top of each other. Startled, Vileena whirled around.

"Uwah!"

"M-My, my legs!"

The soldiers fell noisily to the mysterious gunfire. Anyone could tell that it was an ambush. The bandits had made it seem like they had abandoned the village and had concealed riflemen outside of it. However even if they understood that, the surrounding darkness meant that they couldn't see to return fire.

"The flames", adjutant Sarne yelled. "Put out the torches' flames! The bastards are taking aim

by them!"

It was a wise decision. Without losing a second, the soldiers put out their torches. But as soon as they had done so,

"Ah!"

Several of the soldiers suddenly shouted as a crimson tail blazed through the darkness: with a whistling sound, a number of fire arrows drew an arc in the sky overhead. One after another they pierced the roofs of the huts which then burst into fire.

"What!"

Light flooded the road where Sarne was. Just as he was rising in a panic, a bullet flew towards him and pierced his chest, and he fell back without another word.

Arrows were still being fired. The thatch on the roofs had been soaked in oil and no sooner did the arrows pierced them that they burst into flames with a roar like that of wild animals. The surroundings seemed to have turned into another world, wrapped in bright light.

Vileena stood stock still, holding her breath.

This time, from every direction, things that appeared to be water jugs were hurled forward and when the oil they contained splashed over the flames, they stocked them to greater strength. Had they calculated that the smell would alert the soldiers if they poured oil throughout the village from the outset?

At the same moment, a shadow drew up to Vileena from behind. As swiflty as the wind, the shadow raced towards the princess then suddenly seized her by the shoulders and waist and swept her away.

"Wha..."

"It's dangerous here. We have to leave at once!"

Vileena heard a young man's voice call out to her. When she looked, the one who had grabbed her was the Imperial Guard, Shique. His expression unusually desperate, he ran dodging the walls of flames that were springing up all over.

"What the..."

Noticing the frenzied uproar in the background, Oubary Bilan stopped moving. He was however a man who had survived many battlefields. When before his eyes he saw the signs of

a change in the prince, he immediately jumped backwards.

Gil Mephius - Orba picked up the sword once more.

Sweat glistened on Oubary's forehead. Somehow, it felt as though he were confronting a mysterious presence.

"You , who are you?" Even as he spoke, Oubary's expression changed in sudden realisation. "You're not the prince, are you?"

"Why is that, General?"

The rope that was wound around his arms was now in his way, so Orba shook it off as he approached Oubary, looking for all the world as though he were about to drape an overly-familiar arm around his shoulders. The general of the Black Armoured Division backed further away. In that time, the fire spread to the walls of the meeting hall. Although the hall had not been doused in oil, unsurprisingly it seemed that some had still spread to it. The fire raced around the building, licking its outer walls while the heat inside soared.

"Tsk."

His hand to his face for protection, Oubary ran towards the outside but Orba was a fraction faster and stood in his way.

"Bah, move!"

"Don't be in such a hurry, General."

Orba smiled. Just before, Shique's voice had reached his ears.

Good man, Orba had thought from the bottom of his heart.

The reason he had shouted louder than necessary was so that Orba would hear. You can leave the princess to me, now do what you want to do – that was his message.

He could hear the roar of the flames. The blazed had by now engulfed part of the roof and sparks dripped like blood.

"That time too, there was a fire like this one. Won't you revel in this scene a little longer, Oubary Bilan!”

"That time?"

Judging that there could be no more waiting, Oubary struck out with his brawny arm even as he yelled. Orba nimbly dodged and kicked him down from the side. He sat astride him as part

of the ceiling collapsed.

Gunshots resounded one after another. The soldiers of the Black Armoured Division tried to hide behind buildings and trees, but with the fire still spreading, the situation was not in their favour. To make matters worse, their surroundings were as bright as though it were the middle of the day. Blood spurted from yet another one of them before he toppled sideways.

"Hey, this way too. Fire! Fire!"

The gun-carrying soldiers finally began to fight back. They could now see their enemies. In a gap in the trees surrounding the village, on top of a hill that rose there, armed men lay in ambush. At long last, those of the Black Armoured Division also had their fingers to the trigger.

In an instant, screams resounded from the village's surroundings and then a large number of angry voices broke out from a heap of piled up straw and rubbish. Swords and axes in hand, the bandits appeared and rushed forward.

"An, an ambush!"

"Everyone, draw your swords! The likes of these thieves won't..."

The ring of flames was still spreading ever further. The survivors of the Black Armoured Division fled from there only to head to where the bandits were concealed. Born in the area, the bandits knew both the strength of that night's wind and its direction. With that in mind, they had calculated where to throw the oil and lay hidden in wait for the soldiers in places where the flames wouldn't reach.

The sound of blades clashing echoed all around. The gun units that lay hidden outside the village maintained their covering fire and one-by-one, the soldiers of the Black Armoured Division were shot without further warning, their heads were smashed with axes, or their chests pierced with swords.

"This is revenge for my parents!"

"How does it feel now, you dogs of Mephius!"

Scorched by the light of the flames, the bandits' faces looked like those of devils. As far as they were concerned however, the demons were none other than the soldiers of the Black Armoured Division.

The hunters and the hunted - Orba and Oubary whose positions had been completely reversed from those of six years ago, both tumbled around on the hunting field.

Shaking off the flames that clung to them, they literally rolled out of the building.

When both stood up, they were covered in black soot. Only their eyes stood out, reflecting the bright red flames.

"Did you plan this, Prince!"

Oubary bellowed. Inwardly, he still couldn't decide whether or not his opponent was the prince. Their features at any rate were entirely the same. But that no longer mattered. Whether his opponent was the prince or an imposter, he had lured the Black Armoured Division into a trap and had brought about the misery of their complete annihilation, and for that he would kill him.

"Even if I did, what would you do about it?"

"You've gone mad."

Oubary drew the long sword at his waist. Even within Mephius' military, he was something of a giant. His specially-made sword was about two fist-lengths longer than normal.

"If the likes of you succeeds to the imperial throne, Mephius will be ruined. With this sword, I will cut through both that future and your neck." Around them was a scene of utter carnage. In contrast to Oubary who stood with his sword at the ready, Orba walked towards him, his blade casually lowered, defenceless.

Fool.

Oubary would be done with this fight in a second then he would have to escape from this place. His sword readied in both hands, he haughtily swung it down from above his head.

A rush of air.

As the wind whistled, Oubary received a strong blow to his forehead and staggered backwards.

What the!

He was stunned, his consciousness hazy. But he was back up in an instant, this time swinging his sword in a side blow. His opponent's sword still hung loosely. He should have easily been able to cleave that slender body in half.

Another rush of air.

"Guah!"

Pain ran through his right arm this time. It felt as though he had been struck through his helmet and armour. Oubary confusedly pulled back his sword and took a defensive stance. A rush of air, then another. This time the wind whistled uninterruptedly. Sparks flew as iron hit iron.

T-This bastard.

Blood was flowing freely from Oubary's brow. His right arm hurt as though it had been broken from where he had repeatedly caught his opponent's slashing blows. He lost his calm. Though his opponent seemed truly defenceless, again and again he was struck by attacks that were as fast as the wind.

Even though Oubary was of course fighting back, he was only swinging at air. Thoughts of 'why' welled up within him. Why wasn't he striking him, why couldn't he easily bridge the distance between them. He couldn't read his breathing, he couldn't see his opponent's movements, he didn't move as he expected him to.

"Wa-Wait."

Oubary shouted as they fought. He was steadily retreating and with no time to even catch his breath, he was barely defending against the ferocious attacks.

Orba on the other hand pressed him continuously, deliberately choosing his timing and attacking in a flash. Seeing the tip of the sword coming from behind to strike at his head, he bent his knees, deflected his enemy's blade and in the gap that created, he slashed at his torso. With a strange gurgling sound, Oubary staggered back yet again.

"Wait!" Oubary still yelled. "This isn't a fight. This is outlandish. Soldiers should face off fair and square!"

Each time he received a blow from Orba's sword, the wound on his forehead opened and Oubary's face was now painted with blood as though with some ghastly make-up. At that point, his consciousness was already seven parts gone. Oubary was not able to comprehend that the person with the prince's appearance was so skilful with a sword. And so he thought he was being cowardly. Even before the fight, he had considered that might be the case.

Orba still dealt his blows. Oubary just barely manage to stop one from landing on his shoulder but his expression twisted in anguish.

"Wait, Prince. Does the prince intend to take the life of one of his retainers with his own hands...?"

The rest of his words were drowned out by the noise of the flames. With the speed of lighting, Orba brought his blade from the left towards Oubary's chest, knocking his sword away.

Oubary finally fell to the ground on his knees. Orba kicked him in the chest. Mephius' long-serving general toppled over backwards. Without pause, Orba's sword rushed towards him. In an instant, a third of the blade was buried in the ground.

"Gyaaaaaa!"

Blood gushing from his head even more, Oubary rolled on the ground. The blade that had struck by his side had severed his ear. Pulling out the sword with all his might, Orba subjected Oubary, lying like a dying insect, to another blow.

He smashed his right shin. He pierced his left shoulder. Then, when his arms and legs were immobilised, with terrifying speed he brought his sword down on each finger, one after another.

And each time, Oubary screamed.

There were no other cries near them. The fight was coming to an end. The bandits who gradually gathered around Orba stood before their bitter enemy as silently as though the souls had been snatched away.

In the midst of the roaring flames, Oubary watched Orba raise his blood-soaked sword over his head.

"He-He-He" Foaming at the mouth, his eyes streaming with tears, Oubary pleaded in a hoarse voice. "Help, Help me, please."

"I,"

Orba spoke for the first time since they had crossed swords. Although by no means a loud voice, every person there heard it resonate eerily. "I heard those screams over and over again."

A smile appeared on Orba's face, drenched in the blood of his victim. If a beast were to smile at its prey on the verge of death, it would surely be such a smile.

"And when the screams stopped was when everyone was dead."

Staring at a point in mid-air, Orba strode forward and planted his feet on either side of Oubary's tear-stained face. Filthy from the blood and the mud, he ground his teeth.

Six years – no, it's closer to seven years now.

A great many memories flickered like images across Orba's mind.

Being burned out of the village. Gathering a gang in Birac. And then, when being degraded

into a sword slave, doing nothing but swinging a sword each day in order to survive.

Every night he had cursed Oubary.

When the mask's spell felt like it was burning his entire face with its intense heat. He had thought he would go insane. He had been terrified of dying. But every time,

I won't die.

Orba had reaffirmed his resolution.

My life isn't anyone's plaything. My life is for the sake of taking back everything that was stolen from me.

The sword in Orba's hand was the compass needle that guided him. He had snatched away a great many lives. All had wanted to live to see the next day. Even so, Orba carried on. When he had fought Ryucown, even though he had seen death in his eyes, Orba had crushed his noble ideals. Simply for the sake of revenge, simply for the sake of achieving his life's one goal.

Looking back, it felt like a mountain of corpses had piled up. And now it felt like one by one, those departed souls were rising and filling the sky, moaning in bitterness and grief.

Indeed - everything was,

All for this moment.

"Hiii!"

The raised sword cast its shadow directly on Oubary's face. It drew a line were that face would be cut through - seeing that, the bandits held their breath while Oubary himself let out a shrill scream.

"Hiii

Brightly ablaze, bathed in the colour of fire and blood, the emblem of the branded.

Countless sparks danced in the heavens and black smoke billowed incessantly. Orba looked up and sighed faintly.

It's over...

From flames it had started, in flames it would meet its demise.

Too gruesome and wretched to be called adolescence, that brutally cruel era came to an end.

Chapter 6: Three-way Struggle

Part 1

Having rushed up, Doug looked down at the pathetic, quivering man dribbling blood and froth.

Orba had thrown off his tattered clothes and was using them to wipe himself down. He didn't smile so much as once when Doug called out "You did it."

"Could you get me a change of clothes?"

"Sure, but" Doug looked quizzically at Orba, "What are we going to do about him?"

"Give him to me."

"Why didn't you land the finishing blow? Are you going to torture him to death?"

Something like that Orba's emotionless smile seemed to say.

Doug shrugged his shoulders. "Hah. But you fought like a demon. You held back when you were fighting me, didn't you?"

"Don't hold it against me. Things would have gotten complicated if I'd beaten you."

"You, saying something like that? You who loved picking fights when you were a brat."

On Doug's order, a new jacket and trousers had been brought. He addressed Orba, who was pulling them on, "I'll let it slide this time but next time, go at it for real."

"If there is a next time. What do you intend to do after this?"

"I'm not sure. But this is probably the end of being bandits. We'll divide up the money we got from Mephius in equal shares then split up. Starting normal lives in the villages around here doesn't sound too bad."

It wasn't only Orba who had been brought to stand at the crossroads of fate. As the smiling

bandits embraced each other in turn, looking at closely, their eyes had lost a certain drive. The glint in their eyes, so strong that it had seemed to give off heat, had faded.

Watching them, Orba could objectively understand. They had turned all their grief and despair at having their families snatched away from them into hatred. But then what was left after they had destroyed the target of that hatred, in other words, after it had disappeared?

Fighting, revenge...

Right after it all ended, both body and soul would surely feel empty.

Orba however still wasn't completely finished. He gave himself a shake to pull his body and mind from their lethargy and strode out of the village. Doug ran after him.

"What are you going to do, Orba?"

"I've still got work to do as Mephius' crown prince."

"And when it's done?"

"I'm sick of being a prince and of being a gladiator."

So I will walk a path different from either of those was how Doug interpreted his meaning. He was going to call out to him again, but then somehow, Doug abandoned that idea and watched Orba's departing form. Thus their first reunion after six years came to a ready end.

"Chief, did Orba leave?"

A man from the same village as Doug asked him. Although he called him "Chief", he was six years older than Doug and had been somewhat acquainted with Roan from the neighbouring village. And of course he also knew of his fight-loving younger brother.

"Yeah."

"Still, to think that in this world there could be such an impossible story. That that Orba became a gladiator then the prince's body double. I still can't believe it. And then that we got our revenge thanks to that impossible story. I feel as though once I go to sleep, it’ll all seem like a dream."

"I thought the same when the village was burned down. And in that dream, I thought it would be good if it was just a dream."

Doug's eyes darkened and he looked around at his joyful companions.

I always, always... felt like I was in the middle of a dream. Even when I was writhing in

anguish at reality, on some level it felt like I was in a nightmare I couldn't wake up from.

And now for the first time he had been able to awaken from that nightmare and could finally clearly recognise that the last six years had been real.

"Still. He..."

"He?" asked Doug, suddenly pulled back to reality.

"Orba. Looks like he decided not to come back to the village. Well of course, life as the prince must be more comfortable than coming back to life in the countryside."

Although Doug had once again turned to his eyes towards the direction Orba had left in, he suddenly shivered.

"Next time... you'll go at it for real?"

"Chief?"

"Although I said it myself, I'll pass. I don't want to get into a fight with someone like that."

"What do you mean?"

"He isn't someone who would be able to live a normal life. So he won't come back to the village either. We might never see him again."

Doug's prediction was destined to be proven wrong. But at the time, he firmly believed it.

They had awoken from their nightmare. But Doug wondered if that was also the case for Orba. Or maybe the Orba he knew no longer existed. Even if he told himself that it had been six years, he had sometimes looked like a different person. In those six years that Doug didn't know about, he had lived in a world that Doug didn't know.

He isn't the Orba from before and of course he isn't Gil either. So... As you are now, who on earth are you?

On Doug's orders, the soldiers of the Black Armoured Division were stripped of their possessions then thrown into the flames. And because he was of course doing his share of the work, he committed an oversight. The corpse of one of those from the Black Armoured Division whom Oubary had brought to the village - and furthermore a man whose face was known to the villagers - was nowhere to be found.

As soon as he had left the village, Orba called out for Shique and handed him down some orders. This time, Shique took several imperials guards with him and they ran towards the

village.

Orba watched them go with a weary face then, when he finally turned around, he opened his eyes wide at the sight of Vileena and Hou Ran standing side-by-side.

"This is...?"

"I had Ran bring me." Vileena's face was pale and her voice listless. She had an air of not being able to tell what was what. "What happened over there? The general?"

At that question, Orba was assured that Shique had used his wits and kept Vileena away from anywhere where sounds might reach.

While waiting for Shique and the others' return, Orba gave the princess a matter-of-fact explanation. Flames could still be seen leaping from the direction of the village. This time it was Vileena's turn to open her eyes wide.

"General Oubary did?"

"Yeah. When I was inspecting Apta, I heard plenty of testimonies of how six years ago, taking advantage of the chaos of war, he and his Black Armoured Division attacked the villages in this area. Then this time, having come to Apta once again, I knew that Oubary would repeat the same thing again and was in the middle of investigating that."

"..."

"Having learned that I had been in contact with the villagers, and in order to seal our mouths, he brought his soldiers for a sudden attack on the villagers and me. But I was able to learn of it beforehand and set a trap, and we were just able to, so to speak, turn the tables on him."

Orba himself thought he was pretty convincing. There shouldn't be anything left to cover.

"To expose such a disgrace for Mephius was unbearably painful, but this is reality. Personally, after Taúlia, I would have preferred not to fight Mephius' military."

"But..." Looking dissatisfied, Vileena seemed to want to protest. Orba was about to nod understandingly at that when,

"Not letting people know anything is a bad habit." A voice came from so unexpected a direction that Orba gaped blankly. "However the prince has a prince's circumstances. Don't argue with him here, Vileena. He's exhausted." When Ran said that, although Vileena still looked far from convinced, for now at least she put her verbal assault on hold.

As soon as Shique and the others had returned, Orba set off for Apta. Incidentally, Shique's

group had brought a horse-drawn carriage with them and had previously dumped into it an object tightly bound with rope and cloth that they had brought from the village.

"Honestly, what a stupid thing to dream up!" Bringing his horse up to Orba's, Shique cursed under his breath. "The smallest mistake and you'd have been dead."

"Same as usual."

"True."

"I'm grateful."

Orba's murmur was scattered by the wind.

"Eh?" At Shique's response, Orba increased his horse's pace.

"Anyway, I'm glad you're still alive."

"No", Orba said clearly as they cantered through the early evening, "I'll be dying after this."

The people at the fortress all came out to greet the prince when he returned to Apta.

"Prince!"

"His Highness has returned."

"Where on earth have you been until now?"

Raising one hand, Orba held back the surging wave of people, all clamouring at the same time, gave them an enigmatic smile then retired to his own room. Just before that, he called a soldier a gave him an order to "Have a messenger ready to go to Birac".

There were countless letters that Orba immersed himself in writing until the break of dawn. As the sky and the river Yunos melted together in the pale dawn, Orba opened the door and stepped out.

"The messenger for Birac?"

"Yes. I will depart as soon as I receive your orders." The awaiting imperial guardsman answered. "I should arrive there the day after tomorrow, no, tomorrow even."

"Oh? Then that's good."

Orba called for the several dozen Imperial Guards still remaining within the fortress and had

them prepare for departure. In the hall where they had assembled, besides the soldiers were also Vileena, Hou Ran and Krau.

"Your Highness", the princess rushed forward. "Then, you are...?"

"Heading for Garbera, yes."

Ooh - there was a stir from the soldiers. Even now, the reinforcements led by the masked gladiator Orba where still being held at the border by Odyne's forces. This was saying that the prince would go there in person.

The countenance of the nearby soldiers turned joyful and their spirits were lifted as this was certainly like the prince, when,

"Will that really be alright?"

Ineli Mephius' figure appeared at the entrance of the hall. Her hands on her slender waist, she smiled scornfully.

"Will what be alright?"

"Hasn't it already been settled? The reinforcements being stopped by Mephius' troops, which settles whether reinforcements are to be sent to Garbera, is in accordance with Father's – with His Majesty the Emperor's wishes. Up until now, you have been too free in using your own judgement, Brother, but don't think that you will get away with directly defying His Majesty."

The strong rays of the rising sun suddenly shone through the hall's high windows. They illuminated Ineli's eyes which gleamed triumphantly.

Well now, said those eyes, *well now, Oh Fake Prince. If you incur the emperor's displeasure and find yourself placed under restrictions, the likelihood of you revealing your true colours will increase. What will you do? If as I suspect you are an impostor, you won't be able to walk this tightrope.*

As the prince fell silent, the soldiers exchanged glances. Vileena too held her breath as she watched attentively.

"Ineli." As a short while, the crown prince of Mephius approached his step-sister, smiling. "His Majesty is surely testing me."

"Testing you?" Opposite him, Ineli was also smiling. What kind of words would the fake use to keep up appearances – there was enjoyment to be had from watching that kind of performance. However,

"Indeed. At this time when Garbera, our partner in alliance, is in trouble, refusing to help them is a 'feigned' intention. Don't you agree? His Majesty is saying that if 'you take such a stupid, shitty order seriously, you don't deserve to be the crown prince'."

"S-Shitty?" While Ineli was still surprised, Orba drew closer to her and put his hands on her shoulders.

"A brat", Orba continued casually, in a voice low enough not to be heard by anyone else around. He passed by Ineli, who was goggle-eyed in astonishment. "You said that you knew about me. You don't know anything. Any more whining from you and I'll strangle you with my own hands. Got it, little girl?"

As Orba was leaving the hall, the soldiers as well as Vileena and the others followed with him. Left behind, Ineli's expression had frozen, her eyes starting to their limit. Her shoulders trembled, then her entire body started shaking.

"Princess?" Her attendant maids who had been waiting behind her rushed up on concern. They gasped at the sight of their mistress, staring at nothing, her face pale, her red lips enchantingly enhanced by the contrast.

"How dare", she muttered in a voice too small, too low for those around her to be able to hear, "How-How dare a mere fake insult *me*. Remember this well, when I tell Father, he will tear you limb from limb."

Part 2

A force led by Eric Amon Doria crossed over the border.

As stated by the information that had already reached Garbera, from the two thousand soldiers Eric had with him, he had left six hundred at the border with Mephius. Appointed to command them was Belmor Plutos. During the ritual at the Water Shrine, he had displayed his 'cute' voice, but of course that wasn't his only accomplishment and, as was to be expected of the second son of the Plutos family which had for generations crossed swords with the Northern barbarians, he was a man whose dauntless courage in battle had earned him Eric's trust.

Naturally it was Eric himself who was leading the main force of a thousand four hundred. They were currently moving southwards along the eastern bank of the river Yunos. The river that formed the border with Mephius flowed west and passed by Zaim.

Majestically flying constant above Eric's troops was the large dragonstone battleship "Venu". It was of a scale to be able to carry eight hundred soldiers but Eric had allowed neither men nor goods to be loaded within it. If the ship was made unwieldy from weight, it would have to be covered in light armour. The soldiers were therefore advancing on horseback while the supplies were being transported down the river by barge. And the heavily armoured ship was like a fortress in the sky.

"Garbera is a country that is certainly used to handling airships." Such was Eric's assessment. They would also be proficient at bombing and attacking ships. An empty warship was easier to control.

On the other hand, the cruiser-class Dragonstone ship "Regin" that had been left with Belmor was unarmoured and made of almost nothing but dragonstone, having been prepared with speed in mind.

"Garbera", a young warrior serving the Plutos family laughed while on the march, "must be convinced that Belmor's group is being used to keep a sharp watch on Mephius."

"That's what I'm hoping." Jolted atop his horse, Eric answered shortly. On his brow was a circlet in the shape of a helmet. When the time came, he would obtain consent from Mephius' Emperor Guhl to cross the Mephian border. If Garbera sent troops to confront them, Belmor's unit would be able to escape that way. The enemy would not be able to hinder them, nor could they ignore them, and their forces would be split in two in vain.

Furthermore, Belmor's troops were ready to attack Garbera's main force from behind when

they crossed the Nouzen mountains. Conversely, they would have the opportunity to perform a pincer attack.

"But... it's galling that there appears to have been a disturbance on Mephius' side."

There was the issue of the reinforcements sent by the crown prince being halted by General Odyne. However, the young warriors usually stationed in Dairan didn't pay it any mind,

"With this, we have proof that the emperor is keeping his promise. There is no need to worry."

"Let's thoroughly show off our Dairan spirit to that insolent Garbera and to our own country of Ende, grown poor through indolence." Eric grinned broadly at the gossip.

He was a man who had spent his infancy and adolescence in Dairan, an area fervent with military spirit. Rather than holding rites and banquets in the capital, immersed in Ende's somewhat decadent customs, he preferred to be as he was now with trusted companions, spurring their warhorses towards battle. And he believed that he had thus the ability to expand the country of Ende.

Their current target was the fort that Noue Salzantes had hastily had constructed. According to the scouts, about three hundred soldiers were crammed in there. They would start with that.

Does Garbera mean to halt us with this then have its main force sortie from Zaim?

Before departing for the front lines, Eric had committed a simple topographical map to memory.

But Zaim is known for being a strong fort. Staying in place and conducting a defensive war would be sure way of playing things, however...

In the meantime, Eric didn't intend to scatter his soldiers any more than this. If the main force made a sortie from Zaim, he would have Belmor's troop go through Mephius and attack the enemy from the west. In that case, even though the enemy would further reduce their soldiers, they would not be able to turn back. With the fortress filled with soldiers, this was advantageous in terms of number of troops.

Noue Salzantes received the information that Eric was ascending towards the mountain fort.

After sending back the messenger from Zans of the Order of the Knights of Black Steel, he folded his arms. Eric was marching by the banks of the Wendt, along a path at the bottom of a gorge over which steep cliffs towered on either side. From their speed, he could garner that even at the cost of sacrificing their ether, they were thoroughly investigating the terrain by

means of airships.

It meant that the reserve unit was laid out to cover every contingency,

He is quite able.

Regarding Eric Amon Doria, rumour had it that although he was gifted in the military arts, he was utterly devoid of prudence. But whatever his political ability might be, when it related to warfare, a singular intuition kicked in.

There had still been no communication from Mephius. It would take too much time even if he sent out a messenger from here to Apta. Besides, the real lord of Zaim, Zenon Owell, had from the outset held no expectations of Mephius.

That we are about to directly cross swords with Ende is already the mark of my defeat.

This being Noue, such were his thoughts. In this war, there was by its nature no other way to victory other than that of taking the path of not fighting. Garbera had little to gain from this conflict, as even if they somehow pushed away Prince Eric Amon Doria's army, they would not have the reserve force to advance their troops over the enemy's borders.

And furthermore... if the centre of the continent were once more to be at war, that major power, Allion, might see a chance to strike out from the East. The relationship between Allion and Ende runs deep.

It was for this reason that Noue had deliberately acted to create a debt of gratitude from Mephius' Gil, in the expectation of reinforcements from his country. Since the enemy had probably planned to be in communication with Mephius, it would certainly cause considerable alarm if troops came from that same Mephius. Ende had set his strategy back to square one, and Noue judged that they should withdraw their troops after all.

It's unlikely that Mephius can make it on time.

Although he thought it shameful, Noue was already half prepared. Naturally he wasn't one to forget to make preparations once war had begun.

"Even Eric can't want a drawn-out war."

Noue stroked his glossy hair and focussed his almond-shaped eyes on the river Wendt below. Awaiting nearby, the cavalry captain Rogier briefly looked his way but didn't say anything since Noue muttering to himself was proof that he was engrossed in his thoughts.

"It should be possible to limit the enemy's movements at the double forts. Surely Mephius wouldn't be so shameless as to not only not send reinforcements but also to join Ende in

attacking from our flank."

Of course, if the reinforcements from Gil were on time, there would be no need to cross the mountains. It was not Noue's creed to incorporate unreliable elements into his strategies, but he remembered Gil's fearless expression.

No matter how bad the situation, there is the possibility of rescue appearing so suddenly as to be anti-climactic. He could not so easily throw away his expectations.

Two days before Ende's troops crossed over the border...

"What did you say?"

Solon, capital of Mephius.

While he had been heading towards an inspection of the construction work at the Dragon God shrine, Emperor Guhl's angry voice suddenly resounded. His surroundings instantly went deathly silent.

The vassal kneeling at Guhl's feet went as pale as though he himself was about to be killed. However, the brunt of Guhl's fury was aimed not at the one who had hurried with the news, but at his own son, Gil Mephius.

"So not only has he not yet pulled back the reinforcements, but he has flown the Dhum out of Apta!"

"Y-Yes."

The Dhum was the flagship of the Imperial Guards that Prince Gil had been given on the occasion of his first campaign. That it had left Apta naturally meant that it was going to send relief to Garbera.

Guhl hastily returned to the palace and gave orders for an aerial unit to also depart from Solon. The one he sent was one of Mephius' twelve generals and the linchpin of the air force, the leader of the Crested Ibis Arrow Division, Yuriah Mattah.

As soon as he heard about it, Simon Rodloom hurried to the audience hall.

"Your Majesty!"

"What are you being so noisy about?"

"What orders did you give Sir Yuriah?"

"That damn Gil's wilful behaviour has become intolerable. Although I put up with his acting as he pleased with regards to Taúlia, this time I clearly gave him an order in the emperor's name. It is a matter of course that he should be reprimanded for such flagrant disregard. Therefore, I ordered Yuriah to halt the Dhum. Where is the problem? Nor do I think it is something that warrants such agitation from the former Chairman of the Council."

"Prince Gil must feel responsible."

"Responsible in what way?"

"Sometime soon he will take Princess Vileena, the proof of this alliance, as his wife. He cannot abandon our ally Garbera in its distress. In what way is this mere wilful behaviour? By no means is the prince making light of you, Your Majesty. Please, I, Simon Rodloom beg of you on my name. Can you not grant His Highness your forgiveness?"

"Ho. The Rodloom family name is something to be held this cheap, is it?"

Sensing that something unusual was occurring between the two, the nobles and chamberlains who were present in the audience hall exchanged glances. There were also those who, fearing to become embroiled, could only blurt out their greetings and leave.

"It isn't criticism towards me. It is dissatisfaction that relief has not been sent to Garbera?"

"It is likely that when the prince found himself in a difficult situation in Apta, the Garberan troops hurried back to help. Such is "honour" between alliance partners. It should be our turn to display it next."

"Idiocy", Guhl snorted through his white moustache. "I hear that Prince Eric is alone in leading the troops of the Duchy of Ende. It will not become a war in which each bet their very existence; it will result in no more than dividing up the territory around Zaim. Besides Simon, you must be forgetting that there is a relationship between Ende and Allion. If we nonchalantly stick our noses in, it may give Ende's friend Allion an excuse to extend its reach in this direction. This time, there is no other choice but to have Garbera struggle through as best it can."

Nowadays, when he gave someone an order, Emperor Guhl was short and decisive in his commands. Right now, even though he enumerated relatively plausible explanations, the one he was talking to being Simon, he was of course well aware that his decision this time was lacking in terms of the obligation owed to an alliance partner.

The audience was engulfed in an ever greater feeling of tension, not knowing what kind of punishment would be visited on Lord Simon who was clearly opposing him on this. A number of the men heard something like a purr.

As Simon remained silent, the emperor continued,

"I am at this country's helm. With two helmsmen, a ship will soon lose direction. The sailors will also lose their morale. That Gil is not sufficiently aware of this. I will remove his authority to use military force. Never again will I allow Gil even for a moment to reassess the duties of the imperial family."

"Your Majesty is the one who should reassess them."

"What?"

His eyes glaring, Guhl was about to rise from his seat. Wearing audacity like a garment, Simon kept his expressionless face lowered.

"Please forgive my impudent tongue. I am prepared to receive any punishment. Although unmannerly, I would say this once. Please, on my name, Simon Rodloom."

"Be silent!" Guhl stood up and thrust a finger before him. "It appears Simon that somehow or another you favour a single helmsman other than me. One such as you stirs up unnecessary waves and throws the country into disarray. Get out! Never show your face before me again!"

"Y-Your Majesty!"

"Lord Simon, what impertinence. H-Hurry and apologise to His Majesty that he may grant you mercy."

Even the minor vassals raised a clamour. The only one not making a fuss was the interested party, Simon, who stood stock still, his face still turned downwards.

When after a short while Simon departed from before the emperor, watching him intently from the side was the old general, Rogue Saian. He too had been going to enter the audience hall but had stopped upon hearing the emperor's angry voice coming from inside. In the end, telling the herald in charge of proclaiming entrances to call off the notice of his arrival, he went towards Simon as he was leaving. His shoulders neither drooping nor his back stooped, Simon was walking entirely as usual.

He wanted to call out to him but seeing the state Simon was in, he couldn't utter a word.

In terms of age, Rogue was five years older. However, he had always had the utmost respect for Simon. That was because unlike himself, who had no skills outside of handling weapons or piloting airships, he recognised that Simon was a man with the talent to face every one of Mephius' difficulties.

And so this time too...

At a distance so close their shoulders could touch, the two passed by each other in silence.

For the occasion of his waiting on the palace, Rogue was clad in armour passed down by successive generations of his ancestors, and he brought his fist to his armoured chest in salute.

The flagship of the prince's Imperial Guards was the large dragonstone ship 'Dhum'.

Despite being a large battleship-class ship, surprisingly there was little room for more than two hundred soldiers. Above the framework made of weightless metal, sheets of iron had repeatedly been added for defence while for propulsion, it had on board nearly three times more ether engines than was usual. As such, the Dhum combined defence and speed. Ordinarily, its cruising speed was about twenty kilometres per hour but by sacrificing defence and prioritising velocity, it could go over seventy kilometres per hour. For a battleship-class vessel, that number was exceptional.

In order to intercept the ship after it had left Apta, Yuriah Mattah's fleet, taking off from a base between Solon and Birac, had immediately spread out in a net around Birac's environs. It was two days after Simon had clashed with the emperor in Solon that the Dhum's gigantic shadow was seized upon. Just as Odyne's troops had done by the Garberan border, Yuriah sent out airships to first stop the Dhum.

Knowing of how the prince had recently been, Yuriah's expression as tense as it was possible that he would try to force his way through, but unexpectedly, the Dhum readily obeyed the order to halt.

Yuriah crossed over in person to the ship and let his large frame down into the Dhum. However, when he stepped onto the bridge, he was left dumbfounded. There was not a single soldier within. There was only the bare minimum of officers needed for the ship to move and the one in charge of handling it from the bridge was...

"Princess Vileena!?" Yuriah's voice unintentionally escaped from him.

The fourteen-year-old princess looked at him in complete bewilderment.

"Have I done something that violates Mephian laws?" She tilted her head to one side. "I asked Krau here for practice in steering a large ship.... I see, there is not but one single sky. Mephius' sky must have its own particular rules. I apologise for my rash behaviour."

"N-No. That kind of thing..."

The fat woman standing next to Vileena looked at her and the embarrassed Yuriah in turns. Having been allowed to search on board, his subordinates unsurprisingly found not a single

armed soldier. Of course, the same held true for Prince Gil.

We've been had.

Yuriah was in his early thirties and was the second youngest among the twelve generals. He clenched his teeth with a grinding sound. Right now, the prince was probably headed to Garbera by a different route.

That or could it be that the princess in front of him was feigning innocence and had instigated the prince to send reinforcements to her native country – while Yuriah also considered that, there was currently nothing he could do in this situation.

"Ships are interesting. To think that one can dance in the sky as one pleases with something so big. Say, Krau. I wonder if one day people will be able to live in the sky." In the meantime, Princess Vileena was acting all innocence, although of course neither Yuriah nor Krau, who couldn't help but be discomfited at being called out to, realised that the model for that act was Princess Ineli.

Part 3

In the meantime, as Yuriah had speculated, Orba's group had gone overland and was crossing the Domick Flats. They had left Apta the evening before the Doom flew off as a decoy. However, it was a distance that would take five days to cover on horseback. By travelling day and night, that time could be reduced by half but of course it was impossible for either horses or people to go without rest.

Therefore, Orba had sent a messenger to Birac before leaving Apta. Having requested it from the wealthy Birac merchant Zaj Haman, who dealt mainly in transporting goods by airship, after a day on horseback galloping almost non-stop, they were now on the high speed cruiser that had been prepared.

The several dozen soldiers and horses were allowed to rest for a night on board the ship while it continued cruising. There was currently no one in Solon who knew of the connection between Zaj and the prince. Accordingly, the convoy disguised as merchant vessels wasn't halted. Once the ships ran out of ether, they resumed their exhausting ride on horseback.

And so, three days after leaving Apta, Orba's group reached the plains looking out to the Nouzen mountains and met up with Kain's troops.

"Or-"

When he saw Orba's figure galloping towards them, Kain spread both arms wide in unconcealed joy. Gouwen shut him up since he who was supposed to be Orba was just about to yell out "Orba" to someone else.

Gouwen quickly kneeled to the ground and gave a proper bow from a subject.

"Your Highness, I certainly did not think that Your Highness would come in person. Nor are we able to properly welcome you..."

"It's fine." Dismounting from his horse, Orba was as curt as ever.

Oho. - Suddenly realising that there was something different, Gouwen made eye contact with Shique who was behind Orba. The fair-faced former gladiator nodded his slender jaw. From that alone, Gouwen was able to guess a number of things concerning Orba and Oubary.

So he really did come, huh?

His arms folded, Pashir watched the prince from a distance. He didn't have an in-depth understanding of him, only a kind of presentiment. But it worried him somewhat that the prince's face held no 'spirit'.

Even though in Apta, even when he wore the appearance of calm, his 'spirit' was so dazzling it was terrifying.

For some reason, he gave the impression that all the drive and ambition he had worn around him had crumbled and fallen away. Going by Pashir's memories, a gladiator who would always be seething with 'spirit' might suddenly one day make that kind of face. Since a gladiator's daily life was to throw themselves into life-or-death fights, it was natural that there came a time when they grew tired of that routine.

Those gladiators who lost their fixation on fighting,

Or in other words who lost their fixation on life, died.

While Pashir inwardly felt somewhat uneasy, he didn't directly mention it to the prince. It wasn't because he was the prince of that Mephius which he would never stop resenting but because he still couldn't get the measure of Gil Mephius - including of his own feelings towards him.

The report that the prince had managed to reach there in person was also transmitted to Odyne Lorgo's encampment.

About two hours after Orba's group had arrived, Odyne himself with only twenty horsemen in attendance stood before him as an envoy. Although it was broad daylight, the sky had suddenly become overcast and the clouds cast a shadow over the plains surrounding the mountains.

Odyne had certainly not expected that the prince would come in person. After expressing words of greeting with a grim expression, he gave a firm warning.

"My deepest apologies but in this too I am upholding His Majesty the emperor's orders. I cannot allow Your Highness to go any further."

Sitting on a folding chair before the cruiser, Gil didn't look Odyne. He was staring up at the sky.

"Is it going to rain?" He asked Gowen who was kneeling beside him. The former overseer of slaves looked towards the sky,

"The weather should still hold today."

"Is that so. If it rains, the water in the River Wendt might rise and block Ende's advance through the bottom of the valley."

During the journey, he had heard of Ende's advance from Zaj's envoy. Of course, it was only the broad outline with none of the finer details. The colour rose in Odyne Lorgo's face. As previously mentioned, he did not think much of Gil for promoting slaves. His tone spontaneously grew ruder.

"With all due respect, all sensible people are unanimous in questioning Your Highness' actions. You make the likes of slaves your direct retainers and form alliances with Ax. If this time you disobey His Majesty's orders, you will not be able to explain it away and it will be seen as rebellion."

Gil still kept his mouth shut.

From Odyne's point of view, the prince had probably believed that by coming in person, he would be able to overrule the situation. But even though the prince had begun to show some aptitude for warfare, it should be obvious what would happen if he defied the current emperor.

This is a stupid mission.

Odyne personally did not believe that the emperor's current way of doing things was befitting of a soldier. Nor was it the duty of a proud military commander to prevent reinforcements from reaching an ally. Nevertheless, under the present circumstances, with Ryucown in Garbera then Zaat in Mephius almost kindling the fires of rebellion, one needed to be careful not to act in such a way as to throw internal affairs out of step.

Orba for his part had his eyes trained far above Odyne's head.

That's right, huh. There's no need for it anymore.

His thoughts were spinning. By 'need', he meant the need to act. When he met a new person as Gil, it was usual for Orba to feign ill-humour. From the words that pulled out of the other person, he could guess at what kind of relationship that person had with Prince Gil. It seemed to have become an ingrained habit.

"Odyne."

"Yes."

Orba looked the military commander in the eyes for the first time. As it was sudden, Odyne Lorgo shrank back a little.

"In other words, you won't move out of my way."

Do I need to repeat myself... Recovering himself, Odyne suppressed a look of contempt.

"It isn't criticism of you, my prince, this is the emperor's command..."

"Leave the tedious repetitions. In other words, you aren't able to read between the lines to the emperor's innermost thoughts and only do exactly as told, making you a disgrace to Mephius' military. If you act without thinking even for matters of such importance, you would probably really enjoy becoming someone's slave. You could eat the food you're given, move about as ordered, then sleep."

"Your Highness. Y-Your Highness, did you call me a slave?" His voice choked in his throat from fury.

"Your Highness!"

Sounds of commotion broke out from the Imperial Guards. They remembered the scene when general Oubary had arrived at Apta fortress and a drunken prince had brandished a sword at him. Right now, Gil Mephius had drawn the short sword at his waist and held it against the nape of Odyne's neck.

"If you're saying I'm wrong, then instead of 'His Majesty, His Majesty', speak your own words, Odyne. Whose soul would your words resonate with, those words that claim that simply watching while Garbera is in danger doesn't sully a warrior's soul in the slightest?"

"..."

At Gil Mephius' words, Odyne Lorgo shook. Not his body. His heart, as that of a warrior who had commanded across battlefields for more than twenty years.

Then there came the voice of someone who could not possibly have been there.

"For abandoning an ally, this country will henceforth be open to every bitter criticism. In all likelihood, it will only give our neighbouring countries just cause for attacking the unscrupulous Mephius."

"Rogue-dono!"

To say nothing of Odyne who was the first to turn around, even Gil couldn't hide his surprised expression. A new group on horseback was drawing closer. At its head was the veteran army general, Rogue Saian.

"Rogue-dono", Odyne's expression grew pained even as he kneeled. "For wilfully moving a

military unit, you too will be severely blamed by His Majesty."

"What is that? I've heard that tonight the moon will be beautiful to behold. Thinking it would be a shame to go moon-viewing alone, I brought this party along with me. Ah but, we're a little early, aren't we?"

The veteran who had once accompanied Prince Gil on his first campaign casually looked up at the sky. The light was fading as dark clouds gathered, and it was by no means a fair prospect for being able to see the moon.

"My orders are to halt any reinforcements sent from Apta."

"Odyne. You still..."

"However!" Odyne interrupted Rogue, "There are places that my eyes cannot reach. There, no matter where you or the prince himself may be going, I would not be able to stop you."

"Odyne."

"... Naturally, I will be reporting this to His Majesty. Did you say that the moon will be wonderful tonight? Gazing at it while going along the way, one might find themselves arriving in Solon tomorrow morning", said Odyne Lorgo.

"Then please excuse me", he addressed the prince before leaving. He waved a hand at his subordinates. How many unsaid words were condensed in that way? The twenty riders he had brought with him still wore severe expressions, however they nodded as one and turned their horses around.

The raised a cloud of dust as they left and while seeing them off,

"That fellow, he isn't a bad man", Rogue said with a very matter-of-fact expression on his face, "but he is a bit too honest."

"So even in Mephius, you find all sorts."

"What did you say?"

"No-Nothing."

Shique and Gowen were surprised to hear Orba's despondent voice.

In fact, various sensations were welling up inside Orba's chest. Since Mephians had burned down his native village, Orba was dubious about the "honour" they claimed to uphold, but perhaps there were Mephians who did follow it.

"I'm grateful, General."

"There is no need to be grateful. Right, shall we go? I haven't been to Zaim since the war. Oh, but last time our destination was also Zaim, wasn't it? It must be by some strange fate..."

"No General, you will pull back here."

"Why such an order?"

"No matter how you turn it, the truth is that this is in defiance of Father. It's best I bear the blame alone."

"B-But..."

"Give my regards to your family. I might come and bother them with a visit soon."

At the mention of his family, Rogue's gaze dropped down a little. Orba had visited the general before and they had feasted on food and wine. Why was it that Orba had recalled something from so long ago.

"Oh, and also, your son and Odyne's daughter seem to be close. Make sure this doesn't cause a rift in their childhood friendship."

"Prince."

Probably because emotions suddenly welled up, Rogue Saian put a finger to his forehead and turned his face away.

I'm also being soft, thought Orba. However, considering the future from here on, he could not take on new 'responsibilities' now. With this...

Because Orba had decided that this would be the last duty he would accomplish.

Chapter 7: Lost Kingdom

Part 1

Half a day after crossing the border, Ende's troops, advancing along the side of the river through the valley, sighted Garbera's advance troops. From the top of the cliff to their right, they could see the light shining off of the Garberan forces' armour and helmets. As soon as the latter saw them, they opened sporadic fire, but the distance was such that it didn't hit.

A number of airships flew out from the battleship Venu and chased after them. Eric however had given strict orders that they were to avoid pursuing them too far.

"Aren't they soldiers from the fortress?"

"No, or maybe knowing the Nouzens terrain, they mean to flank our side."

"I don't care", Eric came to a prompt decision, "They intend to slow our advance through guerrilla warfare. But instead, they'll make us leap forward."

Another half a day later and both armies had their first skirmish with victims.

From the hastily constructed fort at the heart of the mountains, Garbera mounted a surprise attack by an elite force. Guerrilla warfare. The Ende side however overwhelmed them by force of numbers.

"Don't worry about small damage. It's no more than breaking through a swarm of insects. Even if they suck some of our blood and sting our skin, we won't withdraw, there will be no defeat." Eric was not going to lessen the speed of his march as he had fully understood that this was the enemy's aim.

The battlefield was not only on land but also in the sky.

The Ende side was intent on flying airships to investigate the terrain and to locate where the enemy was concealed. Of course on the Garberan side, airships also flew from the fortress. If the sky was won, given the complexity of the terrain, one side would unilaterally gain the upper hand.

There was no denying that Garbera's airships and pilots were all of high calibre. While the main unit lured Ende's airships, a detached force commenced bombing the mothership Venu from its flank. However, Eric had reinforced the Venu into an empty airborne fortress. With neither soldiers nor supplies loaded, and furthermore with even mobility having been sacrificed, everything had been poured into defence until its weight was such that it could until just fly in the air.

"Don't falter. If you falter, you'll be playing into the enemy's hands!"

While explosions continued overhead, Montfort, the adjutant for Eric's main forces, exhorted in the same way as his commander. An airship runner arrived with the information that an artillery corps was lying in ambush downriver of the Wendt.

"That damn Noue. He's all hot air!"

As similar small-scale fights repeated themselves, Eric Amon Doria's confidence grew. By sporadically sending out only small units, the enemy could only retreat each time. From the outset, the relative position of the fort within the Nouzen mountains had not been particularly good. From his scouts, Eric learned that this was something even Noue Salzantes lamented. To say nothing of the general, Zenon. It was proof that things were not going well that he and his subordinate even agreed on this point.

"That fortress will fall easily."

And so the enemy had no other choice but to slow their progress through repeated guerrilla assaults. Taking advantage of that situation, they seemed to be constantly sending their military strength from Zaim to the mountain fortress, however,

"If they could just vacate the fortress and congregate at Zaim. It's because I want that that I seized Garbera by the neck."

Eric advanced his troops on the exhausted mountain fortress.

Under a sky filled with low-hanging black clouds, the army pushed forward with greater and greater force.

On the other side, at Zaim fortress, Noue Salzantes was receiving minute reports from the mountain fortress. A path having been prepared for messengers between Zaim and Noue's fortress, there was no oversight in the information collected.

Still not?

As skilful an organiser as he was, his expression was starting to lose its composure. As previously stated, Noue considered that once the fighting began, there could be no victory.

Even supposing Eric's assault could be halted at Zaim, there was nothing further to be gained and this was a war that would merely serve to deplete soldiers and resources.

If such were to come to pass, it would be a dishonour for Noue Salzantes.

You've still not come, Gil Mephius?

Noue believed that relying on others and praying for help was intrinsically useless. But now...

At that moment, a messenger entered Zaim. The soldier who leapt from the airship bounded into the command room where Noue and Zenon were. What reached Noue's ears, who had half-risen in expectation of some glimmer of hope, was:

"The enemy army has approached within eyesight of the Nouzen fortress. They have struck up camp and it is likely that they will charge within the half hour!"

The report that a head-on fight could no longer be avoided had finally arrived. Zaim was engulfed in fighting spirit and fervour. In its midst, Noue alone sat looking depressed.

At that time, Eric's forces were certainly drawing near the Nouzen fortress.

With their first military gains from the war against Garbera right before their eyes, even Eric’s usually cheerless face shone.

However, this was Noue Salzantes' trap. After repeated small-scale attacks and numerous retreats, the enemy was drawn to their bosom. It was a strategy he had made use of once before at Apta. As part of the information warfare that Noue prided himself on, he had broadcast reports that that fortress would fall easily.

As soon as the enemy ship Venu commenced bombardment of the fort, there appeared cannons that had been camouflaged within the crevices of the steep cliffs that rose on either side. In a moment, the incessant roar of artillery fire drowned out the battle cries from Ende army. Faced with an unexpectedly fierce bombardment, the Venu temporarily retreated. In its place, airships dove one-by-one to intervene, but a larger than usual number of enemy ships launched in counterattack from the fortress.

Under the decorative circlet, Prince Eric's face became grave. But he resolutely gave Montfort the order to have the ground troops rush forward.

"Seize the fort in the time that enemy fire is concentrated on the sky!"

The Venu's defences would be enough to single-handedly occupy the enemy's air force for a while. He intended to gain control on land during that interval.

Eric's decision was the correct one for an invading army that valued speed, however his opponent Noue had thoroughly turned the complicated terrain to his advantage. All along the path towards the fort, holes had been covered with soft sand.

The tactics were rudimentary but it was an effective strategy on this narrow lie of land. As Ende's soldiers and horses came tumbling down one after another, the Garberan troops lying in ambush swooped in to attack. Forming an orderly line along an elevated position of the fort's front façade, the artillery corps opened fire in turn.

Blood spurted from all over. Montfort's troops' formation fell apart and, as though they were crops being harvested, they were beheaded at the neck, struck through the chest with spears or took lead bullets to the temple and died. Montfort decided to have his now disorganised unit halt and, with cover from their artillery, retreat for the time being.

Damn.

Looking up at from the main forces, Eric mentally clicked his tongue. It was Ende's side rather that had been trapped into aerial combat to create an opportunity. By bombarding the warship from the ground and allowing the fighting between airships to intensify, Garbera had lured the ground troops away.

Damn you, Noue. Did you actually place the main force here?

Although they had been allowed to believe that this fortress was a diversion merely meant to slow them down, could it be that Garbera had judged that this might be the scene of a decisive battle?

"My lord, what should we do?" A Dairan warrior at Eric's side asked. His face was flushed with ardour. His meaning was should the main force connect with Montfort's troop? Understanding that, Eric shook his head.

"We'll only be dragged into the enemy's stratagem and bogged down. Send a messenger! Mobilise Belmor."

"Yes, sir."

This decision of Eric's was also absolutely justified. There was nothing about it that could be criticised. However, Noue had undoubtedly provoked that decision from the enemy general.

As to what at the Garberan commander Zans was doing at that time inside the Nouzen fortress, he was preparing for withdrawal. Following Noue's detailed instructions, Zans had made full use of traps and with only a small force had for a time met the enemy on equal terms. But that time was short. There were truly very few soldiers at the fort. Only the airships were there in large numbers as about seventy percent of Zaim’s force had been

deployed at there, but this too was part of the plan to dull Eric’s caution.

"Two enemy airships are leaving the battlefield."

Said a soldier who was monitoring the situation with a pair of binoculars. Zans nodded,

"The detached force will be coming. Hasten the preparations for evacuation. But so that they don't suspect anything, pretend the ships have exhausted their ether supply and are returning here for replenishment, then destroy the interior of this fort."

He saw to it that his orders were carried out thoroughly.

What Noue Salzantes was being vigilant about was Ende's detached force – in other words, the group led by Belmor that was stationed near the border with Mephius. He had looked to Mephius to provide a restraint against them, but Noue's thoughts on that matter had changed. From having talked directly with Mephius' crown prince, he had sensed that there was a secret agreement between the prince's father Guhl Mephius and Ende.

That unit will probably cross the border and attack Zaim by a route that Garbera can't obstruct.

Once the enemy entered Mephian territory, their movements would be hard to read even for Noue.

Or perhaps they would contrive to suddenly appear from the south and attempt a pincer attack again Zaim. Furthermore, Noue hadn't spoken of this to anyone. Suggesting the possibility that the enemy might enter Mephian territory would cause unrest among the soldiers at Zaim and they would lose concentration. None were very astute: although Mephius and Ende might be in secret communication, Noue believed that there was no chance of Mephius itself baring its fangs, but the majority of the soldiers would surely think so. As the saying went, suspicions wreak havoc on the battlefield. If they believed that even Mephius had turned to the enemy, morale at Zaim would collapse.

"Therefore there is a twofold reason for having to first of all shift that detached unit."

Noue had lured the main force in this way and was going to drag Belmor's unit into the fray by means of a fierce battle. His aim with this was to have the main force and the detached unit join up. The force led by Zans was to withdraw to Zaim and to attract the united Ende army there.

Zaim fortress was solid. It would easily repel a charge by infantry and cavalry, and although the airship forces were not ideally arranged, if the war was fought in the sky, Garbera still had a slight edge. Even if reinforcements from their country were delayed, they should easily be able to hold the siege for a month.

Hearing the reports that had been pouring in incessantly from the battlefield, Zaim fortress' soldiers were in high spirits.

"Good." Noue looked as composed as ever. He regretted that his expectations of Mephius had been off the mark, and it was a humiliation for one who considered himself to be a resourceful commander to have to undertake a siege war the likes of which anyone could come up with, but since it had already begun, there was no helping it. "The knights of the Order of Bronze will provide support for Zans' withdrawal. Shoot with guns and arrows and only use airships to create a diversion. Do not get deeply embroiled in fighting."

For now, the traps and stratagems that he had prepared were working.

As far as Noue was concerned, there had from the start been no need for showy military gains in this defensive battle. Since this wasn't a war into which Ende itself had poured its full strength, he had to take the wind out of Eric's sails from the start.

However,

"He gave Zans the order to pull out?" His horse standing at the ready by the castle gate, Zenon Owell furrowed his brow. "What is he doing? This is a rare opportunity. If we push our main force out of here, we will easily be able to take Eric's head."

Zenon was not as concerned about Ende's detached unit as Noue was. Furthermore, he didn't place much faith in the strategies Noue dreamt up.

A man who only draws up strategies in his head.

If say his retainers or companions were to fight to their utmost, Zenon rewarded them with the highest prizes and praise. He was a commander who cared about his subordinates. But he was prejudiced in believing that a person who had not experienced actual combat was in no position to talk about actual combat.

"War is a living creature. The situation changes from one moment to the next. To be able or not to sense that directly on the battlefield can be said to be the main thing that determines a commander's ability. Even though I acknowledge Noue's knowledge and resourcefulness, his strategies are still merely worked out before the fight. Right now, I myself know the current situation best."

And Zenon judged that this was too good an opportunity to let slip.

Although they were in the extreme positions of enemies, it could be said that Zenon and Eric were alike. More than their personalities, it was in their way of thinking about war that they resembled each other.

Zenon Owell himself along with his Knights of the Order of the Tiger left through the castle gate. As the fighting would take place along narrow valley paths, he only took two hundred able subordinates with him.

Upon receiving the urgent report, Noue was horrified.

Is this, as could be expected, his ever coolly-controlled features distorted into a grimace. However, the object of his resentment wasn't only the prince. *Is this another flaw in my way of doing things?*

He himself had caused the unrest in Zaim by keeping his strategy a secret even from Zenon.

Noue was not a general but he had taken pride in being superior to any general in his experience and achievements up to this point in time. However, a battle was a living creature and Noue couldn't grasp anything about a human who took part in it.

Right now, Noue regretted not having made the effort to build 'human' trust.

Part 2

Zenon Owell had charged out roaring a war-cry. The galloping horses drilled holes in the ground and kicked up clouds of dust from the force of their hooves.

Finally, the Nouzen fortress came into view. Along with it came the sight of Ende's main force which had taken up position slightly to the left of the fort, on the bank of the Wendt.

"Charge!"

Zenon had vigorously taken command but just then, Belmor's detached force drew near from the flank.

"Chaaarge!"

Encouraging his men just as Zenon had, Belmor galloped down the relatively gentle slope to his left. They plunged down. At their head was also the cruiser-class dragonstone ship Regin. With the lead party raising an impressive cloud of dust, they struggled against each other and a great many horses and men were driven into the river with no distinction between friend and foe.

Dammit.

Zenon had no time for regrets. In a flash, they had been dragged into a mêlée. A battle-ax seemed about to fly towards him and his beloved horse came close to being impaled on a spear.

"You!"

While skilfully twisting atop his mount, Zenon wielded his sword left and right in counterattack. As the clash of steel resounded, spurts of blood rose in the air. The heads of Ende soldiers went flying. The battle situation around Garbera's second prince was ferocious, and it was as though a gaping wide circle had been carved out around him alone. Ende's soldiers could no longer attack him outright.

But there was a limit to individual fighting power.

Because of the mêlée, Zans' troops that had been withdrawing from the decoy fortress were prevented from leaving.

"That suit of armour – it looks like the enemy general, Garbera's prince." Eric yelled

vigorously from where his troops were positioned. His finely chiselled face burst into a smile, "Montfort, pull to the flank and strike at the fortress. We'll prevent the enemy from joining up. And then – everyone, go. We'll capture the prince!"

In the end, Ende also sent out its main force.

"May our feet house Aba, the spirit of the wind."

"May our hearts rage like the flames of Villar!"

As the cavalry set off with the force of loosed arrows, the army corps followed behind them, raising a forest of spears.

Zenon's army was caught in an attack from both sides.

Ende's cruiser Regin joined in bombarding the fort and in so doing neutralised its firepower. With no backup, Zenon was forced into a hard fight. As it was a confused mêlée, neither guns nor arrows could be used and each could only swing the weapons they held with all their might. War cries, gasps of pain, then screams and war cries again. All at once, the valley turned into a scene of carnage.

"The prince, where is the prince?"

"Eei, clear the way!"

The hundred knights of the Order of Bronze hurriedly rushed over. Originally the troop had been tasked with covering Zans' withdrawal. They had avoided getting too deeply involved in fighting as per Noue's instructions, but of course, they put those aside when faced with the second prince being in danger.

Drawing their swords or affixing their spears under their arms, they came to assist Zenon's group. They were unable to reverse Ende's momentum however. The Garberans who had been expecting a siege war at Zaim did not after all have numbers exceeding those of Ende.

Zenon cut through a spearhead and sent it flying then, even as he was turning around, he beheaded a soldier who was drawing up to him from behind.

"You despicable Endean curs. On top of breaking its agreement, did Mephius also join with you to let you through?" Zenon's hatred was also turned towards Mephius, which should have been their ally. The detached force which should have been stationed along the border had moved, which meant that no reinforcements from Mephius would come. "This is why those Mephian savages..."

Before he could continue to yell any further, a spear struck his horse in the neck and Zenon

fell from it. For the soldiers of Ende, there could be no greater achievement. With a cry, they surged towards him.

"Prince!"

Within the Knights of the Order of the Tiger, several chosen to be the prince's bodyguards took up position to protect him. One had his head split open, one was struck a smiting blow to the chest and as he fell, Zenon somehow or another regained his stance. As he stopped a blow from an enemy sword, tears gradually filled his eyes. The full force of his hatred was turned not against Ende, nor against Mephius, but against himself.

For his part, Noue had gathered the soldiers remaining in Zaim fortress and was about to send them out with a captain of the Order of the Knights of Bronze as their commander. It was of course not Noue's real intention to throw soldiers into the midst of a confused, free-for-all mêlée.

To send all the soldiers out from our advantageous position at Zaim...

Although he couldn't help having regrets, the battle would be lost if they lost the prince. This was no time for hesitation.

If it came to a head-on-collision, their inferior numbers were a disadvantage. Of the soldiers remaining at Zaim, Noue was only taking two hundred and he had further had all the remaining airships hastily loaded into the air carriers. The surrounding terrain had been investigated when the Nouzen fortress was being built. By going around the fortress from behind, they would be poised to strike at the enemy from the side.

But even so, that isn't much consolation.

The enemy also had air carriers. As a result, how effective would their air force power actually be? Vexed and irritated, Noue oversaw while the hasty preparations advanced. Indeed, all he could do was oversee. He himself wasn't a soldier. However right now, every single soldier was essential.

If only he himself could hold a sword – for the first time in his life that thought came to him.

You fool. Here where Ryucown was defeated, is your ingenuity also going to be for naught?

For a moment, his almond-shaped eyes lit up with tragic resignation.

"Lord Salzantes!"

His horse gasping for breath, a new messenger had arrived before Zaim's castle gate. Seeing his astounded expression, Noue wondered pessimistically what new failure had occurred.

"A *Mephian* ship!"

"What?"

"A force led by Prince Gil Mephius has appeared from the west!"

"Impossible!"

It felt as though Belmor Plutos' temples vibrated from the war-cry that erupted from behind. As soon as it appeared over the riverbank, the low-flying Mephian cruiser discharged a group of warriors sitting astride horses and small dragons. They galloped in a straight line and tore left and right through the battle formation of Belmor's troops.

"Whoo!"

The Garberan knight who swung his sword next to Zenon cheered. He had suffered an injury to the head and his blond hair was dyed crimson, but his expression was bright.

"Your Highness, Mephian reinforcements. That person over there is Mephius' Crown Prince!"

"What did you say?"

His eyes starting, at that moment, Zenon Owell probably received an even greater shock than Belmor. When the surrounding Garberan forces saw them, they regained vigour. At the head of the reinforcements, wearing a light silver breastplate, was Gil Mephius. Riding a Tengo, he drove off his enemies left and right with a dragon lance while behind him, armed respectively with double swords and a longsword, Shique and Pashir dealt the deathblow to soldiers.

Faced with the Mephian forces they had been certain would not come, Belmor's unit was for a moment on the verge of being routed.

However, from within the mêlée, Eric's right-hand man, Belmor, carefully observed the situation. As soon as the enemy ship had lowered that single troop, it rose in the air again. In other words, the soldiers now rushing in – who appeared to number about a hundred – looked to be their entire military strength.

"The enemies are few!" Belmor called out as, from atop his horse, he broke the sword of a Garberan knight who had lunged towards him. "Return to battle formation. Capture the Mephian prince's head!"

Although they had at first been caught off guard by the surprise attack, the soldiers of Ende had experienced countless battles in Dairan. As Belmor's angry voice washed over them, they

immediately arranged themselves in a file ready to intercept Mephius.

Then, as they were about to rush into that iron-like formation, Prince Gil quickly waved his hand.

"What?"

With a promptness that left Belmor astounded, the dragons and horses turned around and the unit suddenly withdrew. They had been on the verge of intercepting them; for Ende's soldiers, it was an irresistible invitation.

"W-Woah, woah, woooaah!"

With war cries characteristic of Dairan warriors, they plunged forward towards the Mephian prince.

In fact however, just before letting out the soldiers, the Mephian cruiser had dropped off long-range cannons. They had let them down on to the cliff top along with two medium-sized Yunion dragons. Naturally that the pair of dragons could be relied on was all down to Hou Ran's wiles.

Just as he had earlier waved his hands, Gil this time raised them to the sky. It looked as though Prince Gil had, by some magic ritual, called forth lightning. With the bombardment from the sky, people and horses were turned into shredded meat and the pieces flew about along with the dirt and sand.

Belmor worked his throat dry trying to stop his allies. But they didn't stop. Because they hadn't known the second attack would befall them.

We let ourselves be lured and now we can't do anything as they use cannons.

Belmor bit his lips until they bled. If they forced another mêlée, should they strike at Mephius at their front or at Garbera in their rear – before he had time to make that decision, the echo of horses' hooves closed up on them from behind. It was the Garberan troop led by Zenon Owell.

And when Gil once again had his subordinates swiftly turn around, Belmor's troop was caught in a two-sided onslaught. Belmor had been cautious about the cannons for a moment too long, and that moment became the gap that allowed him to be attacked.

Realising the danger Belmor was in, the air cruiser Regin was returning from the fortress but the Mephian war ship was already moving to intercept it. Surrounded by a forest of swords and spears drawn by friends and foes, Belmor was unable to either advance or retreat.

But –

"You..."

In this inescapable situation, Belmor, the beard covering his face dyed in the blood of those he had slain, turned and glared at all 360 degrees around him.

Although young, he was a courageous commander with much experience behind him. And when that experienced commander's eyes suddenly fixed themselves on a single point, his hand instantly went to his waist and he pulled out a handgun.

Fixed in his line of sight was silver armour.

As though by miracle, the crowd divided left and right. As Belmor pulled the trigger, Gil Mephius was thrown off of the Tengo.

Guh – as he hit the ground, Orba let out a small cry of pain.

The Tengo appeared to have been hit in the neck and the small dragon lay near Orba's side, dying as it bled out. Before he had time to grasp what was happening, a group filled with killing intent swooped down from above. He was going to rise to meet the enemy, but he had no sword. It seemed he had dropped it when he fell from the dragon.

Damn.

Clicking his tongue, he rolled on the ground. Sparks flew from where a spear rammed into the space where his head had been just a moment earlier.

"Gil Mephius!"

Belmor bellowed and galloped his horse with the speed of a sudden clap of thunder. A spearhead cut through the very wind above Orba's head.

Orba avoided the blow by letting his body fall backwards, but Belmor instantly turned his horse around and charged a second time. His subordinates also rushed in left and right. Swords and axes were raised above their heads.

At that moment Orba's blood – which normally boiled all the hotter and fiercer in desperate situations – ran cold.

As to why, no one, not even the person himself, could have given a reason. Could it be that he had lost the almost obsessive idea that he would cling to life at all cost? The strength to move arms and legs if so much as the slightest chance of survival was dangled before them; the

strength, if both arms and legs were gone, to seize any chance even with their teeth and not let it slip; right then, his grasp on that had slackened.

If there was one clear factor that determined whether a soldier lived or died on the battlefield, it was surely that one. Say there was a difference in skill or that one wasn't blessed with powerful allies, that one factor surpassed a difference in skill, drew forth good luck and could turn any ally into a hero fearless of death.

Orba suddenly turned and avoided an axe. He swerved his head and just barely managed to dodge another sword but from on top of his galloping horse, Belmor jabbed a spear straight down at him.

He had no time to even swerve to one side.

"*Orba!*"

Was it Shique or was it Gowen who cried out?

Gatchin – sparks flew as steel met steel.

When Orba looked up, a large shadowy silhouette had come galloping from a different direction from Belmor's; from atop his horse, Pashir had repelled Belmor's spear.

"Not enough spirit."

As Pashir's angry voice crashed over his head, Orba came to a sudden decision.

I'm going back.

Indeed, even Orba, who no longer had a place where he belonged within Mephius, had one person and one person only whom he had to return for and convey a message to.

Which means,

He couldn't die.

I can't die yet.

With even more soldiers surging towards him, he jumped forward and slashed them, slashed them and jumped back.

As he threw himself body and soul into the mêlée, as though to let the flickering embers of his rage blaze once again, Orba continued repeating to himself *I can't die*.

Belmor was losing his calm. Nor did he have time to burn in the regret of having lost the perfect opportunity. The sword of the horse-riding enemy he faced was ferocious. Even though he had more than enough confidence in the strength of his own arm, as he lunged with his spear, before he was half way through his momentum, it was knocked clear into the sky and he was aware that he was slowly growing desperate.

As that was happening, he caught sight from over his enemy's shoulder of an approaching force flying Garbera's flag.

Before long –

As the soldiers guarding his sides all fell, his surroundings suddenly opened wide.

"Ugh..."

At that moment, his mounted opponent dealt Belmor a blow to the waist with a spear and he fell from his horse.

Before he even had time to stand up again, to his right and to his left, Belmor felt swords closely pressed against his neck. On one side was Gil Mephius, on the other, Zenon Owell.

His face pale, Belmor silently raised both hands and dropped his sword.

Above his head, Mephius' Crown Prince Gil and Garbera's Prince Zenon looked straight at each other.

"You arrived early, Gil Mephius, Your Highness." Zenon said sarcastically.

"That's because your little sister gave me a sharp kick in the ass."

At Gil's answer, with a *pff*, theirs lips broke into smiles then they laughed.

Part 3

Upon seeing the almost total annihilation of Belmor's troops, Eric's face once more lost all colour.

Controlling his own anger, he had his troops, which were about to rush into the mêlée, stand down then somehow managed to get them into a battle formation. But beyond Gil and Zenon's forces, a large number of airships and riders came into sight. It was the main force launched from Zaim.

Ende still had the numerical advantage, but no matter what strategies they used, their momentum had been completely lost as Belmor's unit had been trampled down and defeated. Furthermore, in the sky, things were also tending towards the enemy's side. Their airships having been destroyed by the Garberan ones, these had joined the fortress in vigorously bombarding the Venu. If the Venu retreated, Belmor's ship Regin would be attacked by Mephius' warship and by Garbera's airships.

His skull pounding as though it were about to be split open from the incessant sound of bombardments coming from the sky, Eric clenched his fists and shook.

"My Lord."

"Lord Eric, the order to charge!"

I can't.

The words he intended to speak were drowned out by the roar of artillery fire. No, it was probably that Eric himself couldn't come to firm decision and was hesitating. A charge would lead to a large-scale war of attrition. Moreover, the momentum was held by the enemy. But if they retreated, Eric and his followers from Dairan would become laughing stocks in their own country. Not only had Belmor appeared to have been taken captive, but he wouldn't be able to face those who had died.

Then, in the dark, overcast sky, a white airship came flying. It flew a flag of black crossed with white.

"My Lord, that..."

When Eric looked in the same direction as his subordinate, a somewhat doubtful expression crossed his face.

That was a signal shared throughout the centre of the continent – the meaning was that the ship was a messenger from the enemy.

Half an hour later.

As though to wash away the blood of the victims that still clung to the earth, rain had begun falling from the sky. The Garberan forces in addition to the main force from Zaim had arranged themselves in a battle formation while on the other side, the dispersed Endean soldiers had also entirely regrouped into files. Although they had bought time, both sides were unmoving, paying careful attention to the enemy.

The commanders-in-chief of both armies were inside the Nouzen fortress.

Eric Amon Doria of Ende.

Zenon Owell of Garbera and also, having hastened with reinforcements from Mephius, Gil Mephius.

It was Gil who had proposed the meeting, offering as terms to release the captured Belmor and his subordinates. After exchanging the conventional greetings, the three of them fell silent for a while. Only the incessant sound of the rain, as it beat down with ever growing fury then suddenly grew calm again, could be heard.

Whenever the eyes of the two other than Gil met, they immediately averted them. For Eric's part, he felt like rebuking Mephius for having appeared to reinforce the enemy. However, since Mephius was ostensibly tied in an alliance with Garbera, there was nothing unnatural about their actions and Eric wanted to avoid committing the folly of publicly revealing the secret agreement between himself and Emperor Guhl Mephius.

On the other side, Zenon felt like rebuking Eric for throwing aside the vows of friendship sworn with Grand Duke Malchio. However, as it was Garbera that had annulled the alliance through a wedding to Princess Vileena, despite being the first to suggest it, he too was not in a strong position in this meeting.

And as for Gil, he had his back turned to both of them and kept gazing at the scenery outside the fortress. After the three of them had spent fully ten minutes like that, he turned around and approached them.

Because of the rain, the inside of the room was dim and gloomy, and the three people's faces were enveloped in shadows.

"At any rate, both of you are extremely skilled," Gil said abruptly. "I heard the details of the

battle from both of your soldiers earlier. For I who am inexperienced in leading an army to war, it was very educational."

Zenon and Eric both looked stunned.

"You surely didn't call this meeting to tell us that." Eric said in a raspy, subdued voice. "Did you think that when Mephius arrived, my army would swear allegiance without resistance? We'll return to our camps and settle this right now."

"Those are my lines," Zenon sneered. "Since Lord Eric has taken the trouble of leaving his own country and travelling all the way to Garbera to be defeated here. His lordship still needs to be schooled in Garberan ways."

If Zenon was the light, Eric was the shadow. Be it their expressions or their tone of voice, such was the difference of impression between the two of them. But in the contents of what they said, they closely resembled one another. Wearing a smile, Gil said,

"It can't be the wish of either Garbera or Ende to turn their entire countries into theatres of warfare. So how about this, in order for me to save face, won't you be reconciled here and now"

"Save the prince of Mephius' face?" Eric's ever sombre expression darkened even further with the shadow of hatred. "What are you talking about? You have some nerve when your country puts no weight on its agreements!"

"Exactly right!"

They both had different reasons for their indignation but because neither could voice them outright, there was a certain humour to the situation. Zenon wanted to reproach Gil for arriving late with reinforcements, but since those reinforcements were originally due to a personal promise between Gil and Noue, they weren't something formally agreed upon by the two countries. Because Zenon had also taken the attitude that they couldn't be counted on, he couldn't openly say anything now.

Then,

"I am not my father, Guhl Mephius."

At Gil's blunt statement, both of them seemed to go *Oops* and, overawed, they held their tongues. They recognised that the emperor of Mephius was going to calmly watch this war unfold in defiance of the alliances, and their remarks were in criticism of that emperor.

Before the two of them, who could not judge his real intentions, could say anything,

"I myself hurried to the battlefield in this way simply because I wish to maintain the alliance with Garbera. At the same time, I do not want to get into further trouble with Ende. Lord Eric, just now, you mentioned an agreement."

"N-No, I..." Eric looked sour. As the prince had himself said that he was different from the emperor, Eric had thought that his secret agreement with the emperor had become public knowledge. From the crown prince and Garbera's points of view, that would surely come across as “foul play”.

While Eric, unable to say anything, broke out into a cold sweat, the crown prince said something unexpected.

"Well, though I don't remember Mephius having exchanged any formal agreement with Ende at the moment. Ah, but if you mean in a private sense, there was a letter from your brother, Lord Jeremie..."

"What did you say?"

This time, it was Gil who remained silent. The now openly angry Eric seemed about to press Gil for an explanation.

"What was that you said? What kind of agreement did you say exists between my brother Jeremie and Mephius?"

"I'm repeating myself but it isn't anything official. It should be something similar to what you hinted at just now."

Lord Eric suddenly stopped moving. He drew his thick brows together.

"I can't be. That my brother would stir up Mephius and then with my back turned..."

His imaginings made his body and heart feel cold. Even though he realised that his unconcernedly moving his army to Garbera had in no way been at his brother's instigation, it had come to this.

"Well then," Gil cleared his throat and once again gazed out at the scenery made hazy from the rain, "whatever secret agreement may exist, I don't wish to step any further into Ende's internal affairs. Nor do I think it is a good idea to spill any more blood."

"How much faith can we place in your words?" Prince Zenon of Garbera shook his head. His handsome features had a firm look that made him resemble his little sister. "Crown prince or not, Emperor Guhl is still in excellent health. Furthermore, it's been suggested that you and the emperor are by no means of the same mind. No, it is not only you. Neither Lord Eric nor I are eldest sons. It is not possible for we who will not become sovereigns to trust each other and

pull up camp."

"If we can't believe in each other's "heart", how about believing in each other's "benefit"?"

"What?"

"For example, recently in my own country, there was a certain amount of turmoil during the Founding Festival. Although this may be rude, I believe Garbera has also experienced something similar."

"..."

Gil implicitly alluded to the affair with Zaat, then to the one with Ryucown,

"It seems to me that the three people here should first be turning their attention to the situation inside their own country. Otherwise, ill-intentioned people from the east, or perhaps from the west might take advantage of the turmoil to extend their grasp to the three countries. On the other hand, neither Garbera nor Ende have anything to gain from further fighting – as things are now."

Gil turned his eyes towards Ende's prince. Still reeling from shock over the matter with his brother, Eric felt as though his innermost thoughts had been seen right through and glared at Gil for a moment then immediately averted his eyes. After that, Gil this time turned his gaze towards Zenon.

"And so the alliance between Mephius and Garbera remains unshaken. Does it not?"

"A tripartite alliance?" Zenon sighed so as not to reveal his inner surprise. "What an outrageous thing you've come up with. We can't enter into an alliance with only the three of us."

"It's not something as complicated as you're thinking of. We won't be exchanging written oaths of everlasting alliances. The "benefit" of all three countries is to pull up camp. That is enough for now."

While they still had their own thoughts on the matter, both Eric and Zenon put an end to their harsh moods and the three people reached a definite conclusion.

"The rest is a problem for another time," seeing how things had progressed, Gill lightly returned to his previous attitude. "There will be no further pointless waste of lead bullets, arrows and human lives. With this, we can go back."

At that point, Zenon, his face calm, took a shot in revenge at the Mephian prince.

"Prince Gil."

"What is it?"

"Incidentally, do you get along well with my younger sister Vileena?"

Gil chocked violently at the abrupt question.

"Y-Yes" Looking over his shoulder, Gil blushed a little and nodded. "Both in Solon and at the time of the war with Taúlia, her brave actions were a great help."

"Ho," Zenon's smile seemed to say that it stood to reason. "Certainly it being Vileena, she would show peerless heroism for the man who won her. But if you mishandle her, she'll murder you in your sleep."

"I *get it* already."

"Farewell," Zenon's smile grew wider, "Prince Gil Mephius. When a date for the wedding ceremony is officially decided, I will personally rush over as envoy to offer my congratulations. At that time, do call me your brother."

He was a man who exuded royalty in all things.

Still looking back over his shoulder, Gil allowed a small smile to flit across his face, then left.

Part 4

Amidst the pouring rain, first the Mephian forces, then those from Ende pulled out of the Nouzen mountains.

Astride a horse, Zenon watched this for a short while then, with a wave of his hand, he gave all of his troops the order to withdraw.

Noue Salzantes, who had remained at Zaim fortress, was at the castle gate to meet them at their return. Zenon jumped down lightly from his horse.

"I've caused you trouble." He spoke to Noue first. "I still have a lot to learn. Your ingenuity is indispensable for Garbera. I hope you won't be disgusted by this, but I would like you to lend me your strength again."

"Of course," Perhaps because of the rain, Noue's usually cool expression seemed to contort under the effects of some kind of emotion. "I received a considerable lesson about myself this time. To be frank, I realised that I was too conceited. I too still have a lot to learn."

"Is that so?" The rain became weaker and Zenon looked up at the light that shone through a gap in the clouds. "Then Garbera will become a stronger and stronger country. Since both you and I have realised our immaturity, that means we can grow from it."

"Yes."

As Noue respectfully stood straight to attention, Zenon stifled his laughter.

"Did I do something?"

"No."

He was remembering how Gil, who affected being so cool-headed that it was provoking, had become flustered the moment he had started talking about his sister Vileena.

It had only been for a short while, but after having been in contact with Gil, Zenon had considered him to be a man who didn't have the slightest affinity with his younger sister. He was puzzled therefore by the give-and-take that had obviously taken place between the two of them at the Mephian imperial court that he himself couldn't visit.

"Gil Mephius, huh?" On the verge of entering Zaim fortress, Noue couldn't help but overhear what Zenon murmured. "He is still green. He is green but he will probably become a more

troublesome man than Guhl sometime soon."

Elsewhere, Ende's prince Eric Amon Doria still had one task left. Or rather, far more than the battle at the Nouzen fortress, the feat that he was to accomplish after this would be handed down as a legend within Ende.

They who had hastily left the Nouzen Mountains crossed Ende's territory without food or sleep, aiming directly for Dairan.

There where their relatives were, starving dragons were rampaging through the land and had already caused damage to several villages in the area. Because most of the warriors from Dairan had left, messengers had been sent to beg for help from other territories, and they passed by without meeting Eric, who was rushing to Dairan with all haste.

Eric and the warriors who followed him, Belmor first and foremost, briskly coordinated themselves and, one by one, swooped down upon every area in Dairan where dragons had appeared. They bombarded the dragons who were approaching the towns and, from astride their horses, wielding swords and spears, they directly confronted those of the dragons that had already entered the streets and drove them out.

It was by no means a battle without victims. But, at the height of the struggle, over and over again, Eric encouraged his vassals by shouting out, "You cannot let there be more victims among the people than among the soldiers! Remember that if there is even one death more among the people than among us, it will mean we were defeated!"

And at last –

"Magnificent."

When the series of battles finally came to an end, Eric threw down his smoking riffle while soothing his favourite horse. Before him, the dragon that he had just slaughtered was bleeding out. And in place of a groom, a man stood holding his horse's bit.

"With this, it should be mostly over."

"Sir Plutos."

The other person was Belmor's father and the lord of Dairan, Kayness Plutos. From since he was young, Eric had loved him more like a father than he did his real father.

"However, while it might late to say this, it is strange; wild dragons have rarely been seen in this area."

Eric jumped off his horse,

"I too, before we rushed here, thought that my brother's army surrounded Dairan. "

"Shush! Don't say reckless things."

"This sudden uproar is too unnatural. … Something is up. We can take it that my brother has something to do with it."

"Anyhow..., in the first place, how did you come to learn of this in the far-off Nouzens? No, even after you had left the Nouzens, the eyewitness reports could not have reached you, my lord."

"There was a man who saw through *this*."

Eric didn't know. That Gil Mephius had hinted at his brother being up to something was simply his making use of the rumour that the two princes were on bad terms. Indeed all he had done was to let Eric believe that his going away had been at Jeremie's instigation.

Just as Noue had once made use of the embers smouldering within Mephius, so too had Gil used the embers which existed within Ende.

"Gil Mephius" Eric quietly muttered to himself as he walked towards where his friends were waving at him "I have no intention of quietly putting up with this. Ende will inevitably get burnt even more. And if that is to Mephius' benefit, you will certainly be the one laughing, Gil. It may be that from now on, because of your very existence, Mephius might pose a greater threat to Ende."

Numerous thoughts and feelings twisted and frayed, and soon gathered around the name of "Gil Mephius".

But whether they were wary of that name, feared that name or praised it, the various futures forecast for Gil were all destined to fall apart.

For a while now, Vileena Owell, observing Gil's profile, had been unable to decide whether or not to speak up.

He had only just returned to Apta. The princess had been summoned by him and had gone to the roof of the barracks. From there, they had an unbroken view of the progress on Apta's reconstruction. The mountain ridge burned golden and feathery clouds hung low across the sky's scarlet belly, as though swept there by a stroke of a paintbrush.

"In Apta..."

"Yes?"

"Did it rain? It was pouring in the Nouzens."

"It rained here too. As it has been raining on and off, the locals said that there will be heavy rain during the night."

After answering with a *Is that so?*, Gil fell silent again. Disappointed, Vileena looked towards the same direction as he was.

It seemed people were in uproar in Solon. For having remonstrated with the emperor, Simon Rodloom had been placed under house arrest. Simon was a prominent figure even among prominent figures. Even the crafty courtiers had fallen into step and had sent a jointly-signed letter asking for him to be pardoned.

The emperor's wrath however did not abate. Odyne and Rogue, who had "let slip" the prince's troops from under their very noses were temporarily banned from Court and, by imperial command, were not to take a single step into Solon without an express order from the emperor.

Perhaps thanks to this turmoil, there was no one to block the path of Prince Gil's troops as they returned directly to Apta. Of course that didn't mean that Gil would receive no rebuke. The verdict would certainly fall before long.

How will Solon move when that happens?

She had heard that there was a strong tendency in Solon to view the prince, whose actions had preserved the honour of the military, as a hero. If then the prince were to receive excessive punishment, many of the army commanders and nobles would plead against it. Perhaps large-scale actions would occur within Mephius itself.

Incidentally, Ineli Mephius had been in Apta until the previous evening but had hastily left for Solon as if to avoid crossing paths with Gil. She hadn't informed anybody and it had been so abrupt that even Vileena hadn't been able to give her farewells. She didn't know if Ineli's sudden actions had a connection to the uproar in Solon, but,

What does the prince himself think?

Vileena's future would also be affected. She had hoped that the person himself would broach the subject, but they had been like this for about half an hour since he had called her.

"Prince,"

Although it might still be hard to talk, Vileena intended to first express her gratitude for the relief of Garbera but,

"I'm sorry for having you be a decoy in the air carrier."

The prince once again spoke just a few words. Vileena was disconcerted.

"There's nothing to be sorry about. As long as I can be of use, I don't mind what I need to do."

"Thinking about it, those times with Ryucown, Zaat and then the war with Taúlia, your actions, Princess, put any military commander to shame."

"P-Please stop." The princess displayed the bashfulness of a fourteen-year-old girl. "I simply acted as I pleased."

"Right, the princess is always honest and frank."

"Me, I... I don't have your far-sightedness and deep designs, Prince, and each time I get completely carried away by my own emotions. At those times, I realised that I am no more than a child who knows nothing. I've come to feel envious of you, Prince, you who is always looking towards the future."

"Me, I..." He repeated her words then, with abrupt timing, he looked into her eyes. "Princess,"

"Y-Yes." For some reason, facing each other like this caused Vileena's small chest to stir noisily. But she looked back into Gil's eyes without turning away.

"I hope you will never lose that honesty. No matter what happens from now on."

Vileena was inwardly startled at his sudden words. The prince probably couldn't take an optimistic view of the fate that awaited him. That he had deliberately spoken those words was perhaps because he had looked at the future ahead of them and had accepted it.

Vileena repressed her momentary unease and smiled sweetly instead.

"That all depends on you, Your Highness"

"On me?"

"While I am grateful for your words, Prince, I do not think that I should remain as I currently am. The same holds true for His Highness Gil. First of all, I would like you to fix that secretiveness of yours and trust me."

"Y-Yes."

"There you are! As soon as I press you a little, your eyes start evading me."

"Is-Is that so?"

"While saying that I'm fine as I am, you, Prince..."

"I get it, I get it!"

Gil sighed resignedly and, as though to put distance between them, walked two or three steps.

Watching him, Vileena scrunched up her eyes as the prince's figure overlapped with the setting sun.

"Then, will you promise me?" She said, still dazzled. "From now on, would you confide in me without concealing anything? If you do, I will help you to the best of my poor ability."

"Yeah. But."

"But?"

"Don't forget one thing. Mephius' prince Gil is a 'liar'."

As Gil smiled, his figure half melted into the golden light, Vileena stared blankly for a moment then immediately puffed out her cheeks in annoyance.

"Honestly!"

Gil laughed out loud. Drawn in by that smile, Vileena eventually joined in his laughter. From behind that open-hearted smile, the ephemeral setting sun could still be seen.

Vileena didn't notice however. No, even if she had noticed, it would have been no concrete premonition that flitted through her breast. However it may be, Gil and Vileena, their shoulders close together, watched as the sun slowly set.

A cold wind soon started blowing around Apta. Once only, Gil asked,

"Are you cold?"

Vileena shook her head.

"No, the temperature is just right."

"That so. Then..."

… then can we stay like this a bit longer?

Was certainly what he wanted to say, but Gil kept his lips shut.

Vileena blushed for no particular reason and the continued to gaze at the sky in silence.

It was probably the first time since Vileena Owell had entered Mephius' territory that she and Gil had spent time peacefully together.

Vileena would remember that time in the sunset for a long time to come.

Epilogue

His throat was hideously parched.

The man who half-opened his eyes realised that he was alone in this place that was wrapped in darkness. As he was about to rise, burning pain shot through his entire body and he moaned.

That fucking bastard, Gil. That inhuman demon...

While he – Oubary Bilan writhed with pain and was tormented by the memory of his terror as that sword fell on him again and again, a fierce resentment blazed up within him.

They had fallen into a trap laid by Mephius' crown prince Gil, one hundred a fifty of the powerful Black Armoured Division had been lost, and Oubary himself had for no reason had agony inflicted upon him. He had had his ear cut off, his right leg crushed, and of the fingers of his two hands, there were only three that he could still freely move. His ribs had also been broken and Oubary wasn't able to raise his torso without crying out in pain.

Where – is this?

Oubary was suddenly assailed with fear that he had been locked up in an underground prison where even light couldn't reach. If nobody came, and if he received neither rations nor water, he would slowly weaken and die within this impenetrable darkness.

"Hii" A small shriek escaped from deep inside his throat. "Hi-Hiii, hiiiii!"

Seized with frenzy, Oubary forgot the pain from his wounds and tried to get up. When he did so, his head struck something. When he brought both hands up to the low ceiling, it lifted up unexpectedly easily and a breath of fresh air reached Oubary's nose.

He raised himself and found that he was surrounded by walls on three sides but that there was a rectangle cut out of the fourth side through which he could see outside.

Night.

Oubary realised that he had until now been locked up in a rectangular box. Looking hard, he couldn't believe his eyes; there was a sliding wooden bolt. He had been left in a broken down carriage that was tilting diagonally.

Oubary crawled unsteadily out of the carriage. A slight wind was blowing. Carried by that

wind, small raindrops moistened Oubary's dry skin.

"..."

Exposed to the wind and rain, he gradually sorted through his fragmented memories. Amidst the flames, Gil Mephius had stepped over the bloody and filth-smeared Oubary, and, looking down,

"Don't kill him."

He had given that order to someone.

"Keep him alive at all cost. And when I leave Apta, do as I directed..."

Each time Gil's voice played within his memories, his head hurt as though it were going to burst. But, on who knew what kind of whim, not only had Gil not killed him but the bandages wrapped around his various wounds proved that he had even gone so far as to have him treated.

That damn demon, just what, what is he planning?

While a terror that seemed to slice away his very soul and a hatred that burned so fiercely it could turn his bones to cinders alternately took over his body and soul, Oubary crawled forward. Were there no pursuers – he quickly turned to check every time he heard a sound. Before long, he realised that the surrounding landscape was not that of Apta.

Th-This is...

He reached a low hill. Towering beyond the sparse copse of trees, he could see the tower that stood at the centre of capital – commonly known as the "Black Sword".

"Solon!"

In his unexpected delight, Oubary laughed out loud like a child.

Using a piece of wood found on the hill in place of a walking stick, he continued on for about an hour, irritated by his slow progress, until he finally reached Solon's city gate. As the soldiers guarding the gate suspiciously pointed their bayonets towards his strange figure, he identified himself as 'Oubary Bilan'.

The soldiers looked at each other. Naturally Oubary expected that they would immediately apologise for their rudeness and lead him inside, however that wasn't what happened. In a flash, one of them had raced inside and brought back a great many his comrades to surround Oubary.

"W-What are you doing!" Oubary cried out, but no one listened to him and he was led to a building surrounded by stone walls.

Awaiting him there was Colyne Isphan. Among the Mephian nobility, he was a man who had acquired the position of head vassal by showering the emperor with obsequious flattery and by spreading malicious rumours.

"How dare you nonchalantly show up in Solon?" He spat out with unusual violence as he fixed his eyes on Oubary through the grate.

"What are you talking about?"

"Do not feign ignorance. Solon has been in an uproar this past week. His Highness, Crown Prince Gil was assassinated in Apta by the Black Armoured Division."

"Assassinated!?"

Oubary opened wide his mouth to which dried blood still clung.

According to Colyne –

After taking reinforcements to Garbera, Prince Gil had returned to Apta five days after he had left.

Apta made merry for the hero's return. Gil Mephius had smilingly responded to the calls of the people thronging the streets, and had even said "I'll hold this child" as he lifted the grandchild that an old woman was holding up with both hands.

Yet it happened that very night.

Fires were lit everywhere within the fortress and a banquet was held. After drinking a cup or two of wine,

"I'm tired so this is going to my head quickly", he had said with a wry smile and, in order to cool down, had left the hall. He went to a balcony surrounded by a low railing that faced the river Yunos.

A great many people within the hall witnessed it.

And a great many people heard it.

There were maybe two or three rounds of continuous gunshots and the prince, who had been holding a wine cup in his hand, jerked violently and lurched forward before disappearing over the railing.

"Prince!"

Most of the people in the hall, regardless of age and sex, had rushed over. But the prince's body had fallen from the cliff and disappeared beneath the pitch-black surface of the river Yunos.

Soldiers quickly lit pine torches and searched the river by boat and airship.

"But what the people who were searching the river saw instead of the prince was," Colyne spoke cheerlessly, "men galloping away on the opposite shore wearing the equipment of the Black Armoured Division."

"Ridiculous."

"The search carried on night and day. Soldiers were also dispatched from Solon in response to the news. Although he still hasn't been found, since the crown prince must have passed away, His Majesty will probably call off the search within the next two or three days and plan to hold a funeral – is what people are saying."

"Ridiculous!" Shouted Oubary, wheezing and gasping for breath. "I did not give any such orders. For one, I was prevented from moving by the prince himself. As for those Black Armoured Division soldiers, they'll simply have been other people dressed up in our equipment!"

"You were prevented from moving?" Colyne's expression was of one of beholding something utterly repulsive. "Well now, it is a fact that shortly before the uproar, you and more than a hundred of the Black Armoured Division disappeared. What happened to those subordinates of yours?"

"They were killed by the prince. Caught in a foul trap!"

His wounds were aching, causing his anger and emotions to flare up, and, dripping in cold sweat, Oubary's expression was truly ghastly. Across from him, Colyne snorted.

"By the prince, is it? I don't think much of your excuse. Tell me, if the prince prevented you from moving and killed those of the Black Armoured Division, why did he do it?"

"Wh-Why?"

"After concluding the alliance with Taúlia, His Highness Gil went almost immediately to reinforce Garbera's army. In the space of that short interval, why did he find it necessary to ensnare you and your men in some sort of trap?"

"That's..."

Oubary opened his mouth but was unable to form any words. Even though he was asked why, the reason wasn't something he could explain. The one point that occurred to him was something the prince himself had mentioned: that Oubary couldn't offer the explanation that in the past, he had himself set fire to Mephians villages.

In place of Oubary who seemed unable to say anything, Colyne's voice grew stronger. "You, on the evening of your arrival in Apta, it appears that the prince, who was drunk, pointed a sword at you."

"What?"

"Of that too there is considerable evidence. When very drunk, the prince pointed his sword at a retainer. That is assuredly a problem, however that was also no doubt the root cause of your plot to kill him..."

"Ridiculous!"

Once again, Oubary forcefully cried out. Even so, Colyne carried on.

"If you still won't admit it, should I add the testimony of the prince's Imperial Guards? About five days ago, they witnessed about a hundred of your Black Armoured Division fleeing West to take refuge in Taúlia. Without answering their challenge as to who they were, those soldiers suddenly unsheathed their swords and attacked. A desperate struggle ensued and the Black Armoured Division and the Imperial Guards were all but mutually wiped out. You were also wounded but managed to escape, isn't that right?"

"Bullshit." Blood seemed about to gush out from Oubary's bald head at any moment. "T-There's something strange about that prince. No, not just something. Everything about him is strange. This is all part of his plan – that demon who's taken on the crown prince's appearance! Don't be fooled! I saw it with my own eyes. How he cast my men into the flames. I actually crossed swords with him. Yes – That's it! Send an airship at once. If you go to that village, you'll understand. That's where those bandits that he gathered are. So... "

"Enough!" Colyne swished his mantle and made to leave. Oubary hurriedly clung to the iron grate.

"Wait. You'll regret it if you don't wait. Sooner or later, Mephius will be taken over by that demon. That man's next goal will be the emperor's position. He'll deceive everyone around him and keep on fooling them as he intends to take the throne!"

"How would the deceased prince do any such thing?" Colyne scoffed as he walked away. "Besides, His Highness was from the start the heir to the throne. If he wanted the emperor's position, he only needed to wait."

"Wait. Wait I say, Colyne!"

"You should go and tell the same tale to His Majesty who is crushed with anguish. Or to Garbera's princess whose soul will forever bear the scars." As Colyne's footsteps faded away, for some reason Oubary's screams turned to laughter.

"Then perish. You damned fools. You too can all die in the flames. When that time comes, it'll be too late to realise that I was right. It'll be too late!"

Oubary's laughter echoed through the stone prison for so long that none knew when it would stop.

"Quit it, Shique. Do you want to make me die of laughter?"

The next morning, the rain had stopped and the weather had cleared.

A single carriage was driving along a Mephius highway. The coachman was a man so huge he drew looks from the merchants and travellers that they passed along the road and his hair that danced in the breeze looked exactly like a lion's mane.

From inside the carriage,

"Seriously, it's a true story. Bah, since you don't understand romance, you wouldn't get it."

"Ha ha ha. And? What happened next? Why is a man who distinguished himself in battle as one of the crown prince's Imperial Guards in a place like this?"

"Well, I'll save the full story for later. Rather than me, I want to hear about you. I was thinking about getting in touch with Tarkas so I was asking around at his firm and among the merchants he knows. And then the subject of you came up."

"When the gladiators were all taken into the Imperial Guards, Tarkas got the equivalent amount of money. I helped him out for a bit while he was setting up a new gladiator group."

The giant coachman who had once been a gladiator in the Tarkas Croup was called Gilliam. About half a year ago, when the gladiators from the Tarkas Group had been accused of being involved in the crown prince's attempted assassination and when, having been transported to Idolo, it looked like they were every one of them going to be executed, Prince Gil had decreed that they were to be incorporated into the Imperial Guards. After the fight at Zaim Fortress with Ryucown's forces, those who had wanted to had stayed with the Imperial Guards but some had walked away free with a cash reward in hand.

Gilliam had been one of those to choose freedom.

"But I've had it with the gladiator business. As a way of also living by the sword, I thought being a mercenary would be better so with my reward I bought a carriage and armour from a merchant I know. Just as I was thinking that I'd need companions, you got in touch."

"A mercenary, huh." From where he had plopped himself down in the carriage, Shique stifled a yawn. "Mercenaries aren't widely employed in Mephius."

"With both Garbera and Taúlia having ended their war with Mephius, there's too much free time here. Didn't you say that you wanted to make something of yourself? If you want to be recognised for your achievements, it's best to go to where the wars are. The Tauran provinces are ideal. Did you know? Taúlia is getting its army prepared. And the opponent is obviously not Mephius. They say a sorcerer's troops have started laying waste in the West. They say he's passing himself off as a sorcerer resurrected from two hundred years ago, now there's a story that's much more amusing than your tall tale."

"Is that so. I don't think it's so different though."

Around the outskirts of Solon, the road was paved with bricks but around here it was simply marked by tress planted at regular intervals. It led further and further west.

"Which reminds me, what about that princess he was so head over heels for? Was it okay to leave her?"

"Anything you talk about immediately becomes vulgar." Scowling, Shique turned worry-filled eyes behind him. "It's not that he wanted to leave her. That's probably what's most painful for him right now. He wanted to be by her side and support her even if only a little more. It's just that..."

"It's just that?"

"It's just that there was a person he could ignore even less."

"Same as ever, I see." Gilliam shrugged his broad shoulders. "And how is the lover-boy? I'm going to want someone to replace me as driver soon."

"He's asleep. Ah, don't wake him up. He's completely exhausted. Anyway, various things happened."

"You're still saying that?"

"I'll take over as driver. You take the corner, don't wake him and be quiet."

Ignoring Gilliam's grumbling Shique took over his seat and fixed his eyes on the boy who lay on his side in the carriage, with his own arm as a pillow. Like a follower of Badyne, he had a

cloth wound around his head, the ends of which hung down on either side and concealed his face. While putting back his blanket which had slipped down, Shique whispered in his ear.

"Sleep tight, prince. You've done well. Even if no one else knows it, I do. Is it enough now?"

The road spread out straight. The sky was so blue it stung the eyes.

Mephius, Garbera, Ende.

Although at present, the relations between the three countries at the centre of the continent had entered a period of stability, each still contained live embers and the situation was still unpredictable.

The one who understood that better than anyone was not a statesman or a noble or a general of those three countries but the boy lying sideways in that old carriage.

During that half day after entering the carriage in which he greedily clung to sleep, what was he dreaming of?

For just a short while, the brand on his back hidden, the boy had taken off both his masks.

Afterword

Oda Nobunaga.

– probably the most famous warlord from the Warring States period of Japanese history.

In his childhood, he was conspicuous for his eccentric behaviour and was even called “the great fool of Owari”, however, after his father died, no sooner had he succeeded him that he displayed talent in a variety of fields. He didn't only suppress the many internal struggles within Owari, but with the motto of “Tenka fubun”, he came very close to unifying the whole nation of Japan.

He who was called a “fool”, how was he able to achieve supremacy in the warring states by the time he reached adulthood?

Many historians and storytellers, past and present, have brought their own interpretations, and have enjoyed the mystery of this “historical fact” as a “story”.

For example, in a situation where there were many enemies within the Oda household, maybe Nobunaga deliberately played the “fool” to throw those enemies off their guard. Or maybe he had from the start been a man who excelled at using his wits, but because his way of thinking was too far ahead of his time, those around him couldn't understand him and simply treated him as a “fool”.

Furthermore, Hirate Masahide who was in charge of Nobunaga's education killed himself with his sword as soon as Nobunaga's father died, and it is rumoured that his reason was “to remonstrate against Nobunaga's eccentric behaviour”. Deeply grieved by Hirate's death, Nobunaga reflected on himself and achieved considerable growth – after all, a story is more interesting if it has an element that can “make you cry”.

Because Nobunaga has been featured as a character in many novels and manga, the true fiction ones are outnumbered by the ones with fantastical plots. Among other things, that in the latter part of his life, the real Nobunaga was a different person, or that someone was manipulating him through sorcery, and one of my favourite mangaka even has a piece in which he was said to be “captured by aliens”.

All of you, my readers have already figured out that Oda Nobunaga is definitely the model for “Rakuin”'s Gil Mephius. Prince Gil who was called a “fool” was replaced by the sword

slave Orba and just like Oda Nobunaga, his name will resound within a world of war.

In the last volume, he will be known in the distant future as “the Dragon Emperor of Mephius”, but – you who have only just finished reading the fourth volume probably think that description is contradictory. So until volume five comes out, everyone, I hope and wish that you will rack your brains like actual authors and historians in order to find that missing link.

-- Tomonori Sugihara